

A ROGER BAXTER MYSTERY

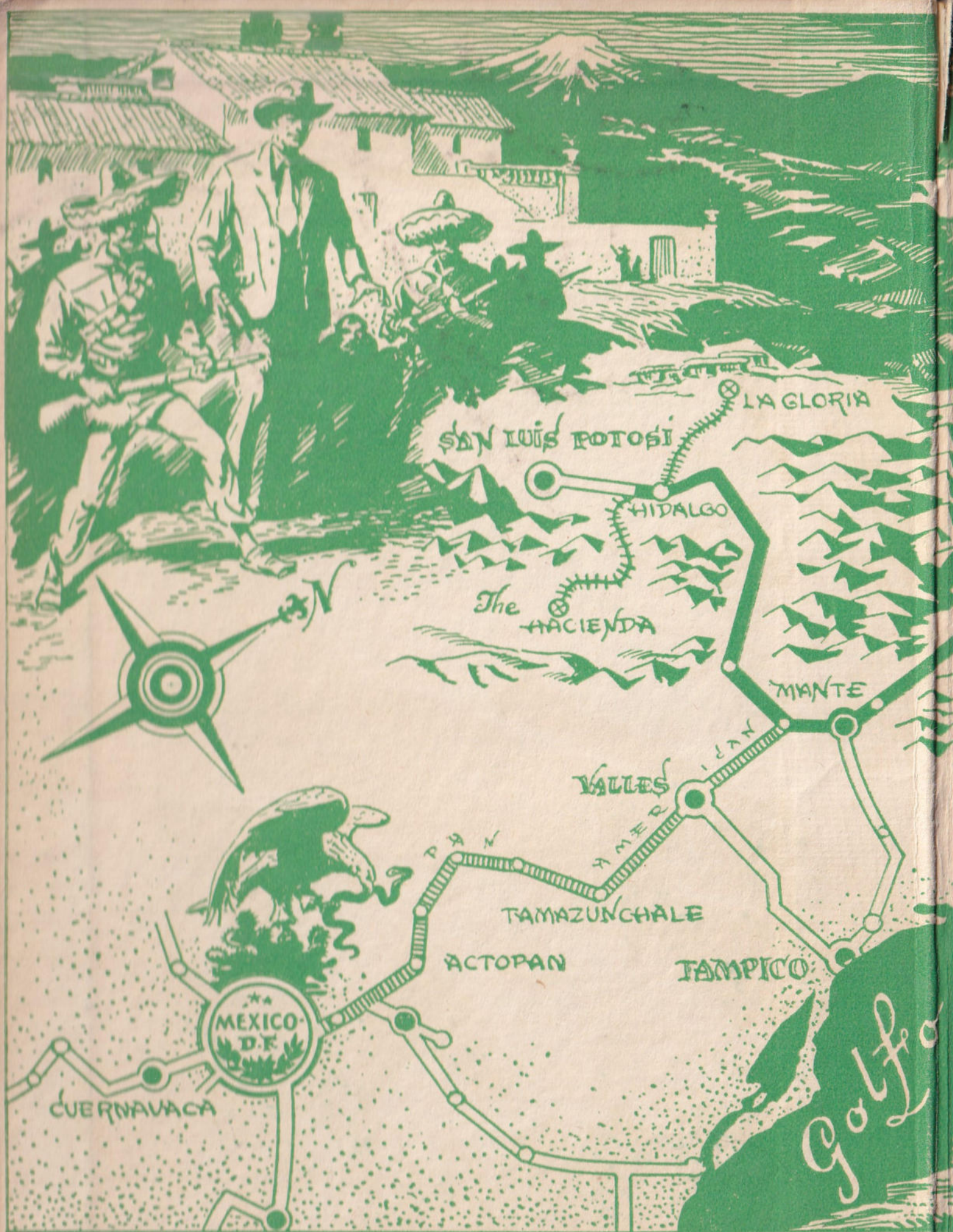
The
**RIDDLE OF
THE HIDDEN
PESOS**

by

MARTIN COLT

Illustrated by John C. Wonsetler

**The
RIDDLE OF
THE HIDDEN
PESOS**



SAN LUIS POTOSI

LA GLORIA

HIDALGO

The HACIENDA

MANTE

VALLES

TAMAZUNCHALE

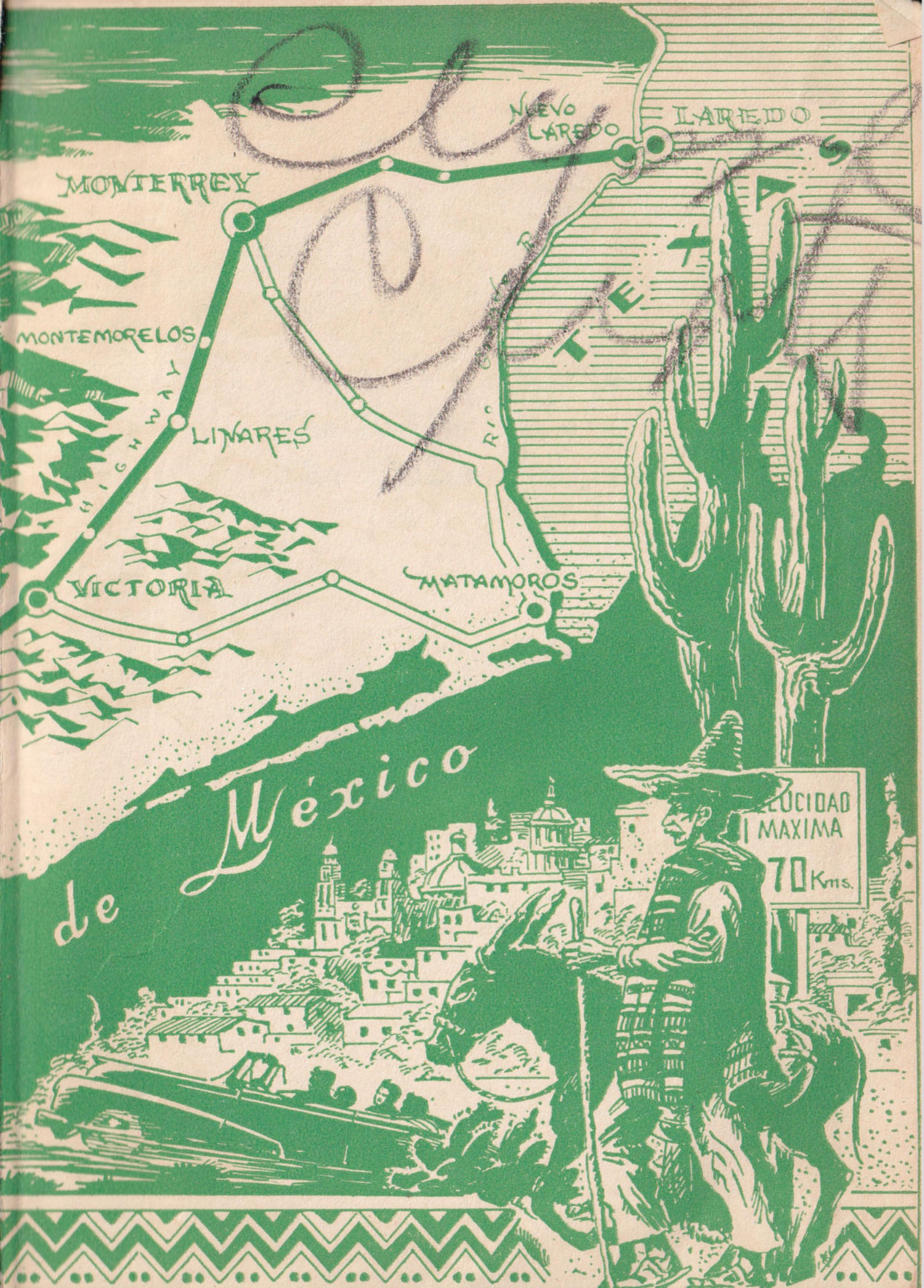
ACTOPAN

TAMPICO

MEXICO
D.F.

CUERNAVACA

Golf



NEVO
LAREDO

LAREDO

MONTERREY

MONTEMORELOS

LINARES

VICTORIA

MATAMOROS

de México

VELOCIDAD
MAXIMA

70 Kms.

The Riddle of The Hidden Pesos

The Roger Baxter Mysteries

STRANGER AT THE INLET

THE SECRET OF BALDHEAD MOUNTAIN

THE RIDDLE OF THE HIDDEN PESOS

A ROGER BAXTER MYSTERY

The Riddle of The Hidden Pesos

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The Riddle of The Hidden Pesos



CHAPTER ONE

THE ONLY SOUND in the room was the soft swish of air from the air conditioning system. Roger Baxter opened his eyes a bit wider and then sat up quickly. This was the day—this was the morning they were going to cross the Rio Grande into Mexico!

He looked at the bed alongside his. Slim Warner was sleeping peacefully. Roger grinned. Why not? Slim had been across the border before. Roger swung his feet over the side of the bed and stood up to stretch. The Venetian blinds admitted only narrow rays of the morning light, but when Roger changed the angle of the slats the room was flooded with bright Texas sunshine.

He looked at his watch on the table and decided that it

was time to get them all up "Slim." He shook the detective's shoulder. "Get up."

Slim yawned and opened sleep-filled eyes. "What's the matter? The hotel on fire?"

"Time to get up." Roger padded across the room in his bare feet and went through the door to a connecting room. Here, too, there were two beds. On one Bill, Roger's younger brother, smiled happily in his sleep.

"Dreaming about food," Roger muttered. He looked at the second bed and Diego Montez, whose dark, sun-tanned face was in strong contrast to the white pillow. Roger put his fingers in his mouth and blew. The two boys came awake and sat up in one startled move as the shrill whistle rang through the room.

"Get up. We've got some traveling to do." To make sure they wouldn't sink back into sleep, Roger pulled the covers off both beds. "Get into that shower."

Roger went back into his own room and started the shower going. What a day! What a trip! He sang out loud until the soap got into his mouth and eyes. When he shut the water off and climbed out, Slim was waiting his turn.

"Call room service," the detective said, "and order breakfast sent up. That'll save time."

"Sure." Roger stuck his head into the adjoining room. "What do you want for breakfast?"

Diego was waiting for Bill to get out of the shower. "Orange juice, toast and a glass of milk."

Bill shut the water off and came to the bathroom door. "What?"

"Breakfast," Roger repeated. "I'm ordering it. What do you want?"

Bill's eyes gleamed. "Let's see. First orange juice. Then

cereal. Then ham and eggs and toast and milk." He stopped. "I guess that's all."

"I should hope so." Roger turned to Diego. "You'd better get some eggs too. We may not be eating again until late in the afternoon."

"O.K."

"Hey, Rog," Bill said, "in that case maybe we ought to have them make up some sandwiches to take along, huh?"

"Mexico," Slim said from the doorway, "is not exactly a desert. It wouldn't surprise me if we even found restaurants along the road. They may not be very close together, but I think we'll find one about every twenty miles. Of course," he smiled, "if you don't think you could last twenty miles we could take some food along."

"Don't mind him," Roger advised. "You ought to know how he is about food by now."

"I know," Slim replied, "but I never cease wondering about where he can put it all."

"You two don't bother me. I'm making an astronomical tour of Mexico, and if eating bothers you, it's too bad."

"Not astronomical, Bill. *Gastronomical*." Roger corrected.

Bill calmly pulled on his pants. "As long as it's food, who cares?"

When the waiter arrived all four of them were ready, and for some time the only sound was the rattle of plates and the crunching of toast. Finally even Bill had finished.

"What do we do first?" Roger asked.

"We've got to go down the street and fix up our car papers and get some money changed." Slim looked at his watch. "It's a little early for that. Offices don't get started until nine no matter how badly you want to get across the border."

"What papers do we need?" Diego asked. "And how long will it take?" Diego was even more eager to see Mexico than Roger and Bill were. He himself had been born in Colorado and had never seen the country south of the border, but it was his parents' home and he had heard stories of it all his life. In fact, it had been for his sake that this trip, originally planned as a camping tour of Colorado, had become a jaunt across the border.

"Not long. We have to get our insurance fixed up and get a car permit, but it shouldn't take more than half an hour," Slim told him. "Then we'll get the car filled with gas and we're off. At the border they'll examine our luggage, but that's about all the formality there'll be."

"Guess I'll get my records up to date," Bill said. "Let's see: Where we stay last night?"

"You've already written that down," Diego reminded him.

"Oh, sure. Here it is." Bill began to pore over his notebook.

"Where does it start—your diary, I mean?" Slim asked.

"It starts when we left Pop at the construction job. But I wrote something down in the beginning about the trouble we had in Colorado. Would you like me to—?"

"Don't let him get started," Roger cautioned. "He'll read us every word. We lived through that, Bill. We know what happened as well as you do.*"

"Anyway," he added, "every other entry probably says something about what you had for dinner or supper—or maybe breakfast."

"It does not. Listen. 'Got to Pay Dirt. Pop having trouble with tunnel. Cave-in. Met Diego Montez. Rog and I—'"

* *The Secret of Baldhead Mountain*, a Roger Baxter Mystery.

Slim interrupted him firmly. "Put that book away, Bill, and listen to me a moment. A month ago you and Roger arrived at Pay Dirt to spend your summer vacation on your father's construction job. You met Diego there and all three of you ran into a lot of excitement. You three," Slim bowed in mock ceremony, "with some help from me, straightened things out. Then we decided to spend what remains of our vacation on a trip through Mexico." He grinned at Bill.

"Get that word *vacation*? It means a period of rest and recreation. The only detecting we're going to do for the next two weeks is to find good places to stay, good food to eat, and new things to look at. And I, for one, would rather not even hear a word about Pay Dirt or anything connected with it for as long as we're on this trip."

Roger and Diego obviously agreed with Slim, so Bill sighed and put his diary back into the bag. "O.K. But I'm going to hold you to what you said about detecting good food to eat."

"As if we didn't expect that," Roger muttered. "Let's get packed and then go over and get our papers filled out."

They wandered around Laredo for awhile waiting for the office to open. It seemed more like a Mexican city than a North American one because all the store signs were printed in Spanish as well as in English, and the streets were filled with Mexicans.

"The people who live along the border," Slim explained, "cross back and forth all the time. So Laredo is about half Mexican and Nuevo Laredo on the other side is about half populated by folks from the States."

Bill pointed to a clock in a store window. "Look. It's nine o'clock."

A half hour later a pleasant man in the office was

counting Mexican bank notes into Slim's hand. "Four hundred and fifty, five hundred," he finished.

Slim took a ten-peso note and handed it back. "Could you give me some change for that?"

He received five one-peso notes in return and then a handful of copper coins.

"These coppers are worth twenty centavos each," the man said, holding up a coin about the size of an American half dollar. "These smaller ones are ten centavos." He smiled. "Have a good trip."

"Boy!" Bill exclaimed. "That's a lot of money."

"It looks like a lot," Slim admitted, "because the exchange is almost five to one. We got almost five Mexican dollars for one American dollar."

"Their money looks pretty much like ours," Roger said as they walked back to the hotel to check out. "It's differently colored, but the size is the same."

Slim nodded. "I think a lot of Mexican money is printed in the United States. I guess that's why it looks familiar."

The boys went upstairs in the elevator while Slim stopped at the desk to pay their bill. By ten o'clock they were carrying their bags across the street to the garage where the car had been parked overnight. A young Mexican brought it out of the dim building and stopped before a gasoline pump.

"Fill it up," Slim said. "Check the oil and water, too, will you?"

"*Si, señor.*" His eyes gleamed at the new convertible sedan. "It is very new, no?"

"*Si,*" Bill answered.

"You speak Spanish?"

Bill shook his head. "Only a few words. But my friend does." He pointed to Diego.

"*Bueno.*" Keeping an eye on the gas pump, the attendant spoke to Diego in Spanish so rapidly that Bill couldn't catch even a single word.

Diego answered just as rapidly. After a moment he turned to Slim. "He says they hear there's a gas shortage and that we'd better take some along in a can."

Slim nodded. He opened the back of the car and moved their belongings to make room. "I think we can take two cans if they've got them."

They stowed the two five-gallon cans in the back and shut the lid. Bill and Diego got into the back seat and arranged some of the extra luggage around them, Bill being sure to tuck safely away a big thermos bottle full of cold orange juice. Alongside the bottle he cached half a dozen chocolate bars. Catching Roger's amused eye, he muttered, "Just in case."

"O.K.," Slim said. "Here we go for the border."

They drove through the narrow streets following the signs until the bridge across the Rio Grande loomed up before them. A cluster of neat concrete buildings flanked it on both sides. Slim pulled up on the right. A khaki-clad customs official looked at their papers briefly, and asked a few questions about where they were born to make sure their answers agreed with the information on their visas.

"Carrying any foreign cameras or things like that?" he asked.

Slim shook his head. "We've got a camera and a pair of binoculars, but they were made in the United States."

"O.K. Go ahead."

They drove over the bridge slowly, stopping to pay the toll about halfway across.

"We're in Mexico!" Roger announced, as they passed the boundary marking.

Bill made a notation in his book. "What time is it?"

"Ten-forty," Slim answered.

Bill put it down. "Now what?"

Slim pulled up again under a portico. "Now the Mexican customs."

He unlocked the back of the car and porters carried all their luggage into a building where it was opened on a long table. While Slim had their papers stamped, inspectors looked through their bags. In a matter of minutes the luggage was closed again and seals affixed.

"It is all ready, señor," the customs man smiled at them. "You may go."

They were watching the porter put the luggage back in the car when a Mexican approached them. "*Buenos días*. You are tourists, no? Then I have for you a map of the Pan-American Highway to Mexico City." He handed them the map.

"Thank you," Slim answered. "How much—?"

The Mexican held up his hand. "It is nothing. It is free." He leaned over to point at the map. "You see, señor, here is Ciudad Victoria 323 miles from here. In Victoria there is a fine hotel—with air conditioning and a fine restaurant. It is a fine place to stop for the night." He put his hand on his chest. "I myself can recommend this hotel."

"Thank you," Sam said. "We'll keep it in mind."

"Señor," the Mexican began again, but a voice cut in.

"Howdy. Going down to Mexico City?" The speaker

was a tall bronzed man about Slim's age. He was leaning against the car behind theirs, a long slim roadster with the top down. "My name's Smith—Lee Smith. I'm heading that way myself."

He caught their glance at his license plates. "Yep. Texas—that's me. I come across here quite often. Good hunting down Victoria way."

The Mexican upon hearing the word Victoria came to life again. "*Si, si!* There is much game there—and a fine hotel."

Smith grinned at him. "We know all about the hotel, son."

"*Gracias.*" The Mexican went back to the third car in line.

"He's a bit of a pest," Smith smiled, "but he's right about the hotel. It's good, all right, and getting to Victoria is a nice one-day drive. I always hole up there myself."

"Maybe we'll see you then," Slim said. "I'm beginning to be convinced."

The porter closed the back of the car and came around to hand the keys to Slim. "O.K.," he said and added, "Thank you," when Slim gave him a peso.

Slim eased the car out of the customs station driveway, waved to the Texan and swung into the main street of Nuevo Laredo. A large sign proclaimed that the road they were on was the Pan-American Highway and that Mexico City was 1,228 kilometers distant.

"Mexico, here we come!" Bill shouted.

"How long is a kilometer?" Roger asked.

"About five eighths of a mile," Slim told him. As they left the town and the highway stretched straight out before them as far as they could see, he stepped down

on the accelerator and the new car began to hum along.

The highway, smoothly paved and wide, ran through flat country not unlike the southern part of Texas they had driven through the day before. The houses, few and far between, were built of flat clay slabs.

"That must be adobe," Roger said.

Diego nodded. "The sun bakes them as hard as brick."

"Look." Bill pointed off to their left. "There's a burro."

"You'll see plenty of them before we get home again," Slim said.

Talking was difficult because of the noise the wind made, so for an hour they sat in silence. Then several buildings loomed up in the distance and signs appeared telling them to slow down.

Roger looked at the map. "Must be La Gloria. We've come forty-six miles."

"Yeah. You make good time on this road."

The village consisted of fifteen or twenty adobe houses strung along the highway. They were built almost on the right of way and all the windows that faced the road were barred.

"Now wouldn't you think," Bill snorted, "that with all the room they have here they'd have porches and front lawns?"

"They have patios," Diego answered. "But they're always in the back of the house. In fact," he continued, "the houses are usually built around a court and the rooms open out into it."

"That's pretty smart," Bill said. "The house itself forms a wall, huh?" They cleared the village and Slim kept the speedometer needle hovering around the fifty-mile mark through the flat countryside. The road ran as

straight as if someone had drawn a line across the map with a ruler. Small groups of cattle grazed in the sparse vegetation, paying no attention to the car even when it nearly brushed them in passing. Several times Slim had to come to a complete stop to allow the animals to move slowly off the road.

The burros grew more plentiful. Most of them wandered at will, walking along the side of the road nibbling at the grass that grew there. Occasionally they passed one with its front legs hobbled to prevent its straying too far from home, and whenever they approached a small village they were sure to see some of the small beasts laden so high with pack loads that the animals themselves were practically invisible.

The sun had been climbing and now it poured down on them mercilessly. Heat waves shimmered off the black road ahead of them and the shiny hood threw back rays that seemed to penetrate even the dark glasses they all put on.

"Whew!" Roger said. "I thought Texas was bad." He looked at the map again. "According to this thing, we're about seven hundred and fifty feet above sea level. We've been climbing."

"I didn't notice anything," Diego said. "It looked perfectly flat to me."

"Too gradual to notice," Slim grunted. "We'll hit some real hills tomorrow." He blew the horn at a cow and a calf who had decided to rest in the middle of the road. They moved over slowly and Slim speeded up again.

"Not much traffic, anyway," Bill said. "We haven't passed anything going our way and we've met only two trucks and a bus."

"And about fifty burros and cows," Diego added.

"How about some of that orange juice?" Slim asked.

Bill dug out the thermos and handed it around and the cold liquid help a little. But a moment later Bill leaned forward and tapped Slim on the shoulder.

"Let's put the top up. Diego and I are baking back here."

"Me too," Roger added.

"All right." Slim pulled up on the edge of the road and shut the motor off. "Now let's see. Which of these buttons do I press to get it up?"

"Wait a minute," Diego said. "We have to unstrap it back here first." He fumbled behind the seat a moment. "O.K."

Slim finally pressed the proper button and the top rose slowly and came forward to the windshield, Roger and Slim tightened the clamps.

"Tuck those straps away so the wind doesn't flap them around," Slim said. He started the motor while he waited.

"Hey, Slim!" Bill sounded surprised. "The upholstery is torn back here."

"Can't be. This car is only a week old."

"Well, it is. Look."

Roger and Slim twisted around in the front seat to see. Bill was pointing to a rent in the red leather—a slit about six inches long.

"What do you know about that?" Slim said disgustedly. "I'll bet the stuffing comes out before I can get it fixed."

Bill shoved his hand into the slit. "It doesn't look—" He stopped. "What do they put inside these seats anyway?"

"What are you mumbling about?" Roger asked.

Bill wasn't listening. He was twisting his hand around inside the seat. Finally he withdrew it clutching a thin

flat package. "What do you do, Slim? Hide things in here?"

"Hide things? Of course not. What is it?"

Bill shrugged. "I don't know. Here, look at it yourself."

Slim took the package and turned it over in his hands. "Strange. I never saw this before."

"Maybe it was left in the seat by one of the upholsterers when they built the car," Roger suggested.

"If it was," Diego said, "then he left more than one." He pulled his hand out of the hole with another of the flat packages.

"Hey," Slim said. "What goes on here? Are there any more?"

Diego brought up another package, and Bill two more.

"There's lots," Bill muttered. And he and Diego went on pulling them out, heaping them on the back seat as they found them.

"I guess that's all," Bill said finally, his arm to the shoulder inside the upholstery.

Slim looked at the pile between the boys, and then again at the package he held. There was no mark of any kind on the wrapping.

"What's in it?" Roger asked. "Don't you think we ought to look?"

"Yeah—let's," Bill urged.

Slim reached into his pocket for his knife. Very carefully he slit a corner of the wrapping and opened it enough to peer inside. The boys saw his eyes widen in surprise, and then narrow as if he didn't like what he saw.

"Well, gosh!" Bill burst out. "What's in it?"

Slim squeezed the package so that the wrapping opened farther. The boys bent over to look, and there was a con-

certed gasp. The package was full of money—crisp new Mexican bills. And if they were all like the one on top, there was a small fortune there. Because that was a hundred-peso note.



CHAPTER TWO

"BURIED TREASURE!" Bill said in a croaking voice, after a long moment of startled silence.

"What's it all about?" Roger asked.

Slim didn't seem to pay any attention. He pulled all the bills out of the opened package and counted them, and put them back. Then he reached for a second package, slit it open and repeated the process. Its contents were the same.

"How many packages are there all together?" he asked finally.

Diego and Bill made neat piles on the back seat—ten packages to each pile. "Ninety-eight here," Bill said.

"With these two, that's an even hundred." The detec-

tive figured rapidly. "If they're all alike, and if my mental arithmetic is right, we've got two million pesos here."

"Two million pesos!" Bill almost fell off the seat in his excitement. "We're rich!"

"Except that it's not our money," Roger pointed out.

"Yeah? Then whose is it?"

"I guess that's what Slim is trying to figure out," Diego said quietly.

"No, I'm not!" The vehemence in Slim's voice startled all of them. "I told you we're here on a vacation—and I mean it. We're going to turn this money in to the nearest police station and . . ." He broke off suddenly and pulled out one of the bills to look at it very carefully. "Wish I had a magnifying glass," he muttered.

Roger reached into the glove compartment for the binoculars. He unscrewed the front lens and handed it to Slim.

The detective held it over the bill, moving the lens back and forth to get a better focus. Finally he held the note up to the sun to look through it. Then he pulled his billfold out of his pocket and took out a hundred-peso note from those he had received three hours before.

He examined this one as carefully as he had the other. Then he held the two notes side by side—the old one next to the crisp new one. Suspense and the curious taut look in Slim's face held the boys quiet.

At last Slim spoke. "I was a bit premature," he said. "I don't think we'll turn this money in to the police after all. We're going back to the border." He tucked the new bill back into its package, and returned his own to his pocket. "Even if this was our money we wouldn't be rich, Bill. This stuff is counterfeit."

"Counterfeit!" Roger echoed blankly.

"You mean it's phony?" Bill leaned forward. "But why—?"

Slim checked him with a glance. "Don't ask me to explain everything—I'm no mastermind. All I know is that someone apparently picked us for the job of smuggling two million bogus pesos into Mexico. We must have looked like nice innocent tourists—too innocent to get a thorough checking at the border."

"But how did the people who put them in our car expect to get them back?" Roger wondered.

"The same way they put them there, I suppose," Slim answered. "While we were asleep and the car was parked."

"You going to try to catch the counterfeiter, Slim?" Bill asked, suddenly eager again.

"No." Slim sounded very definite. "If this were good money, we could turn it over to the Mexican authorities, get a receipt for it and that would be that. But since it's phony, and since it must have been put in our car on the other side of the border, in Laredo, there are international complications. Our best bet is to take it back to our own customs officials and let them worry about it."

He looked at the speedometer. "We're only a hundred miles from the border. We can make it in less than three hours and be on our way again this evening."

"But, Slim—" Roger began.

Slim had already turned the key and started the motor preparatory to swinging around.

"Slim," Roger repeated.

Slim flipped the gearshift lever into neutral and shut the motor off.

"Maybe we won't go back to the border after all," he said quietly.

"That's what I was thinking," Roger agreed.

"What are you two talking about?" Bill asked impatiently. "Why can't we?" He grinned. "Naturally, I'd like to take a crack at catching whoever put the money here, but . . ."

Diego spoke up. "That's it, Bill. That's why we can't turn around. The people who put the money in the car won't like it."

"All right. Be mysterious." Bill slumped back in the seat and began to unwrap a chocolate bar. "All I can say is it sounds pretty silly to me. Here we are in wide open country with nobody in sight to stop us, and you say we can't turn around. It doesn't make any sense."

"I'm afraid it does," Slim said. He squirmed his long body into a more comfortable position. "Look, Bill. Suppose you had hidden something in someone's car. You'd want to keep an eye on the car, wouldn't you?"

"Sure. But I don't see anybody keeping an eye on us." He looked back along the way they'd just traveled. "There isn't a car in sight—or is there?"

They all turned quickly. Roger put the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the road carefully. "Yeah, there is a car coming," he said.

"Get those packages out of sight," Slim ordered. "Put them under the bags or under your windbreakers. Hurry."

When that had been done he opened the door. "Come on. We're just stopping to stretch, if anybody should ask us."

They all got out. Bill hastily handed paper cups around, and filled them with orange juice.

The distant speck had grown quickly larger and in a

few moments a car pulled up alongside. It was the sleek roadster with the Texas license plates.

"Trouble?" Smith asked, opening the door and leaning out.

"Just easing our muscles a bit," Slim said. "Care for some orange juice?"

"Got a jug of it right here, thanks." He pulled the door shut again. "As long as you're all right—" He smiled. "Stopping to help is a sort of custom along this road because it's usually miles to the nearest service station."

"Thanks," Slim told him. "That's a good thing to know."

"Well, I'll be seeing you. Couldn't avoid each other if we wanted to. There's only this one main road down. Have a good trip."

Slim waited until the roadster had vanished before he got back into the car. "See what I mean?" he asked Bill.

Bill shook his head.

Roger said impatiently. "Slim means that since there's only this one road, we don't have to be watched every minute. They'll know where we are anyway."

"Oh."

"And besides that," Diego said, "they probably think we won't find out about the money, so they won't worry too much. All they have to know is where we're going to stay overnight, so they can get at the car."

"Say!" Bill sat upright. "What about that Mexican who was trying to get us to stop at that hotel in Victoria—or whatever the name of that town is. Maybe he's one of the gang."

"Could be." Slim shrugged his shoulders. "Could be anybody."

"Well, anyway," Bill said, "it can't be that man who just stopped."

"Why not?" Roger asked. "Because he's an American? Since when don't we have American criminals?"

"That's not why," Bill said. "It's because he went ahead of us. If he was keeping an eye on us he'd stay behind, wouldn't he?" He reached for another bar of chocolate, but stopped his hand in mid-air. "Just before he came along, we were talking about why we couldn't turn around and go back. I still don't get it."

"Because," Roger explained patiently, "if we do it would mean one of two things to whoever's watching us: either that we'd found the money and were going to turn it in, or that we'd changed our mind about traveling in Mexico."

"And in either case," Diego went on, "they'd be in danger of losing the money."

"Oh." Understanding dawned suddenly. "You mean they might stop us, huh?"

Slim nodded. "That could be an understatement. People have been known to do strange things for money—and counterfeiters are accustomed to taking chances."

"If we went straight ahead, Slim," Roger said, "and acted as if we didn't know anything, they'd probably leave us alone, wouldn't they?"

"Probably. But in that case they'd also probably get the money, and I can't stand by and let them turn that much worthless stuff loose." He smiled. "Maybe it's the detective in me."

"There's something coming again," Bill said quietly.

It was a bus, this time, crammed full of people and loaded high with parcels and luggage. It stopped alongside and a young Mexican who had been lying on the

piled baggage on the roof peered down at them over the edge.

"Trouble?"

Slim shook his head. "No, thanks. Just stopped for a rest."

The Mexican grinned and pounded on the side of the bus with his fist. The motor growled in response and the bus continued on its way.

"Here comes another car," Diego said.

"Two more," Bill corrected.

The first was a small sedan filled by four ladies—schoolteachers, Bill suggested—who waved to them and kept on going. The second stopped just behind Slim's car and the occupant got out and walked forward.

"Are you in need of any assistance?" he asked.

Again Slim denied the need for help. "Just stopping for a moment. It's nice to know, though, that if we were having trouble, we'd get plenty of help."

The man shrugged his shoulders. "It is a necessary custom here in Mexico." He motioned toward the car which had just passed. "Northamericans do not always realize this." His perfect English had only a faint Spanish accent, but his features were unmistakably Latin-American. He was small and wiry, and his hands and face were dark as though years of sun had beat upon them. Inky-black straight hair showed beneath a white Panama hat, and he was carefully dressed in a gray tweed suit and a white shirt that seemed even whiter in contrast to his skin.

Slim smiled. "That's probably because we have almost too many service stations back in the States."

"If you are not familiar with this road," the man went on, "I think you should know that there is a temporary

gasoline shortage. But you will be able to refill your tank at Monterrey, which is only forty miles from here. From there, a full tank should take you easily to Ciudad Victoria where there is also plenty of gasoline." He started back toward his car.

"Thanks very much. We'll remember."

When the stranger's car pulled abreast of theirs, he stopped again. "There is a most comfortable hotel in Victoria." Then he waved, and his heavy black sedan moved on rapidly, the throb of its exhaust telling of the power of the engine.

"So," Bill said, "*he'd* like us to stop at Victoria, too."

"Wait a minute," Slim said. "He gave me an idea."

"It's probably a bad idea, if he gave it to you," Bill ment on.

"Stop jumping to conclusions," Roger said. "You've probably got him figured out as the head of the counterfeiting gang."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Bill retorted.

Roger ignored him. "What's your idea, Slim?"

"Monterrey," Slim said. "That's a big city and it has an American Consulate. We can drop this money off there and let them take care of it."

"That would get rid of it," Roger agreed, "but it wouldn't do us much good. When the gang looks for the money and finds it gone, they're likely to want to ask us about it, aren't they?"

"Sure," Slim said. "But when we see the consul and tell him the story, we'll get him to arrange some police protection for us for a couple of days. Once the news is out, there'll be no sense in bothering us any more because the gang will know we haven't got their money." He nodded. "That's the best plan, I think."

Slim was obviously right, so in a moment they were once more on the road heading south through countryside that was gradually losing its flatness. Low rolling hills lifted the road up and sent it gently down again, and curves became numerous.

Far off on their right they began to see great masses of mountains, so distant that they blended in with the horizon. But as the miles passed under the wheels, the rocky crags came closer, and the road began to climb and weave almost continually. They rolled along in a wide valley with jagged hills on both sides, nosed over a crest, dipped down into a plain—and there before them was Monterrey, its tall white buildings shining in the early afternoon sun.

Traffic grew thicker and the small adobe houses began to appear more frequently until without realizing it, they were in the city's suburbs. There the adobe houses gave way to modern cottages of white cement, and immense factory buildings. Trolley cars appeared to complicate further the business of driving between hurrying trucks and plodding burros.

"We'll ask the first policeman where the American Consulate is," Slim said, guiding the car around a burro-drawn cart.

"There's one." Bill pointed.

"He's got a little American flag on his sleeve," Roger said. "What does that mean?"

"Means he speaks English." Slim stopped the car and leaned out to ask directions.

"*Si, señor.*" The smartly dressed traffic officer left the small platform on which he was standing and came over to the car. "The Consulate of the United States? It is not far. You turn to the left here at this corner and proceed

three blocks. Then you turn to the right and go one half of a block. You will see the building most easily."

"Thank you," Slim answered.

With a blast of his whistle, the officer halted the traffic and politely motioned to Slim to make the left turn. Slim waved as they passed, and guided the car down the narrow street to the third intersection, where he turned right and stopped at the first vacant spot. An American flag flying from a staff in front of a building identified it as the Consulate.

"Going to take the money in with you?"

Slim shook his head. "I'd better talk to the Consul first." He opened the door and got out. "Don't leave the car. I don't think anything will happen, but if it does—yell good and loud."

It didn't seem possible that anybody could be afraid on a bright, sunny afternoon, on a public street full of people and cars, but all of them shivered just a little as Slim disappeared into the building. Suddenly, with Slim gone, the most innocent looking passer-by took on a sinister aspect.

"Feels creepy," Bill said. His voice was lowered as if he were afraid he'd be overheard.

"Yeah," Roger agreed. "It's because we don't know who to look out for."

"I'm betting on the Mexican who stopped back on the highway," Bill said.

Diego shrugged—a gesture he must have inherited from his Mexican parents. "It could be, I guess. But it's just as likely that it was that American—Smith—or it might even be those four ladies in that car that didn't stop."

"It might even be somebody in that bus," Roger continued. "How do we know?"

The minutes dragged slowly by, and the boys watched the doorway of the Consulate anxiously. Roger finally flipped on the radio and amused himself by looking for some news from home, but Diego and Bill sat stiffly on the back seat as if they were expecting to be hit on the head at any moment.

"Why doesn't Slim come?" Bill muttered.

Roger looked over his shoulder. "Don't be childish. He'll come as soon as he can. He's got a lot of explaining to do—or maybe you think you could walk in there and say you'd just found a couple of million phony pesos in your car, and expect them to believe it."

"Here he is!" Diego said. "But he doesn't look very happy."

"You can say that again," Roger whispered. "I wonder what happened."

Slim got inside the car and shut the door carefully. Then he counted slowly up to ten.

"Didn't you get to see the Consul?" Roger asked.

"The Consul," Slim said carefully, controlling his voice, "is in the States. And the Vice-consul is in Mexico City until tomorrow morning." He mimicked a high precise voice. "If you will leave your name and address, I'm sure the Vice-consul will get in touch with you in a few days."

"But didn't you say it was important?" Bill asked.

"Certainly I did. I asked the clerk to put a call through to Mexico City, and he said that was impossible unless I explained the situation to him. And somehow I didn't want to go into this business with a clerk. It isn't exactly a routine affair, you know, and—I'm inclined to think it may be a pretty serious one."

They were all silent a moment, in response to the sober

tone of Slim's voice. Then Roger said, "Couldn't we call him ourselves—on a pay phone?"

"The clerk wouldn't tell me where he was. Of course we could call the Embassy in Mexico—but there again I'd have to talk to a clerk before they'd put me onto somebody who could really take action."

"We can't very well just sit here until the Vice-consul comes back," Roger said slowly.

"No. We've got to do something. I thought of leaving you kids here in a hotel, and trying to get back to the border myself, but I don't like the sound of that."

"Well, gee! I don't either," Bill said. "Heck, if anything's going to happen to you, Slim, we'd want—"

"It wasn't myself I was thinking of," Slim told him dryly. "It occurred to me that if I left you three alone, in a hotel, I'd be in a good spot to do anything I was told—such as handing over the money without an argument. All anybody'd have to do was to tell me you were being held as hostages, and—"

"Oh." Bill's voice was small.

"Yes. It would be that easy. So I think we'd better stick together. And I think we'd better do something about this right away. The minute we leave the car alone, unwatched, or in a garage overnight, the money will probably be gone." He swung around forward in the seat, and switched on the ignition.

"What about a plane, Slim?" Diego suggested tentatively. "We could get to Mexico City or to the border—either one—in a very short time that way."

"Exactly my own idea." Slim grinned briefly at him as he pulled the car away from the curb. "We're heading for the airport now."

"Will we take the money with us?" Bill sounded ex-

cited again. He'd been wanting to take a plane trip for a long time.

"Sure. You two back there get busy stuffing it in one of the duffel bags. Take the camping things out—we'll just leave them in the car."

At the airport Slim hurried into the ticket office. He was away a much shorter time than he had been in the Consulate, but when he came out his face looked even grimmer than it had then.

He got into the car and immediately headed back toward town.

"What's wrong?" Roger asked.

"No reservations—for two days. Either way—north or south. We could wait around here on the off-chance of a cancellation, but apparently it would be pretty unlikely to have four of them turn up at once." He sighed and rubbed a hand over his eyes, wearily.

"Couldn't we just go back to that cop we talked to—the one that spoke English—and get him to take us to a police station?" Bill suggested.

"Yes, we could—of course. And I'll do it if I have to, but I'd certainly rather not. For one thing, it would probably take days to get the situation cleared up, and our vacation would be over by then. But there's something more important than that. Counterfeiting, with international complications, isn't a local proposition, you know. It involves both countries already, and I'd like to get to our own officials about it as quickly as possible. Besides, there's undoubtedly quite a good-sized gang operating this setup, and when you get a thing like that it's unwise to throw yourself on the mercy of somebody you don't know a good deal about. That's one of the reasons I didn't want to talk to a clerk. And even a cop— Well, we

have corrupt police at home; we have to admit there might be some here, too. So I'd rather not run the risk."

There was another long silence, and finally it was Roger who ended it.

"I've got an idea," he said. "Let's look at the map."

Bill and Diego leaned forward, as he flattened the map out so that they could all see it.

Roger put a pencil point on the dot that represented Monterrey. "Here's where we are now. So we're one hundred and eighty miles from Ciudad Victoria—the place everybody seems to be heading for. If we go on that far it'll look like we're still innocent tourists. Right?"

"Right," Slim agreed. They had reached the center of Monterrey again, and he parked the car along the edge of a pretty green square.

"Well, we ought to make that in about four and a half hours. There don't seem to be too many hills on the way." He didn't wait for Slim to say anything. "And Mexico City's only about four hundred and fifty miles from Victoria."

"If you're suggesting," Slim told him firmly, "that we should drive right through, the answer is no. That four hundred and fifty miles would mean about twenty hours, because in that stretch we'll hit some real hills. And on a lonely mountain stretch, at night, we could be stopped so easily that it would be like taking candy from a baby."

"But suppose we had a three-hour head start?" Roger asked. "That would give us over a hundred miles. The mountains don't start until you get way down here." He pointed to a town on the map called Tamazunchale.

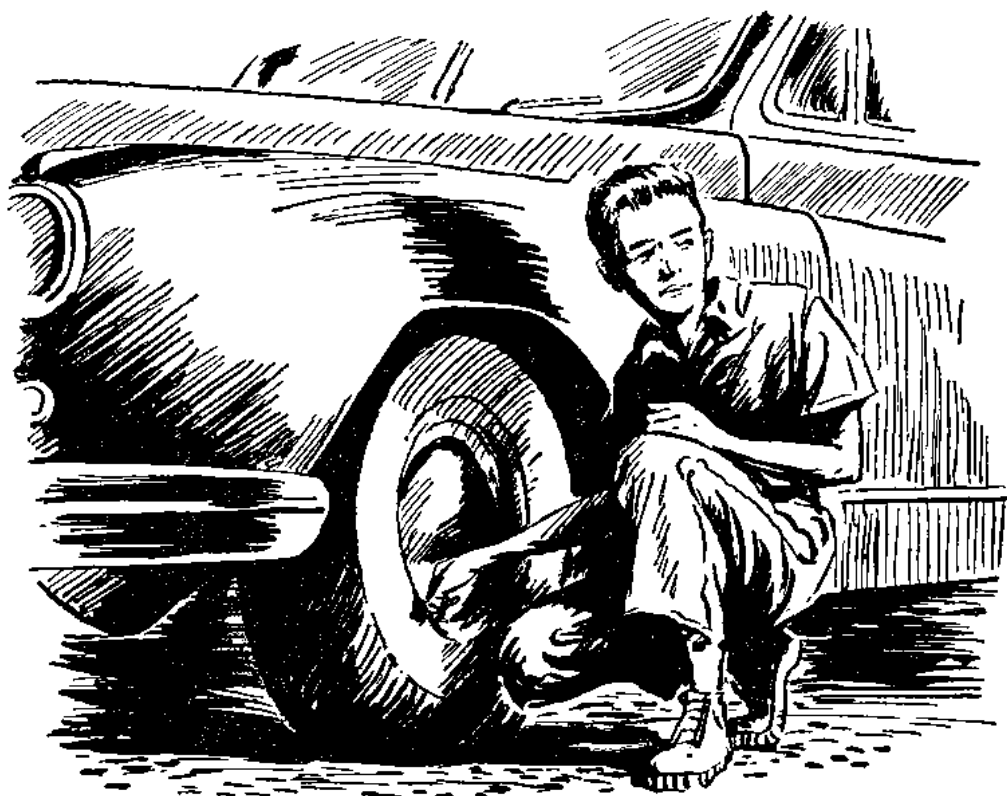
Slim peered at the map closely. "Looks like you're right about that. But how are we going to get this three-hour start?"

"I haven't got it all figured out," Roger admitted. "But if we go to the hotel and register like anybody else, and then sneak right out and take off again—well, by the time they discover we're gone, we'll be miles ahead of them. We already know they don't watch us every minute. If they think we've checked in for the night, they may not worry about us any more."

"But they'll worry about the car," Bill pointed out. "Of course, we could take the money inside with us—"

"No. That we couldn't do. I don't think they'll try to remove it in daylight, but somebody might get close enough—on some pretext or other—to make sure we hadn't disturbed it." Slim sounded thoughtful. "We might be able to pull a fast one, at that. But we'll have to make it look good."

He sat up abruptly and started the car once more. "All right. Let's try it. You boys get the money back inside the upholstery, just in case we get a casual inspection somewhere, and we'll head for Victoria. And maybe, when we get there, we'll head right out again. We'll have to see what kind of breaks we get."



CHAPTER THREE

THE ROAD out of Monterrey threaded its way between rocky, jagged hills which hugged the highway. But as they left the southern suburbs behind, the hills withdrew from the road leaving it in the center of a wide plateau. There seemed to be a gradual downgrade, noticeable even though they sometimes climbed and then dipped again. They were made aware of their descent by the increase in temperature, more than anything else.

Roger applied himself to the map, while behind him Bill and Diego were industriously repacking the packages of money into the upholstery through the rent in the leather.

"The first place we go through according to this map,"

Roger said after awhile, "is Linares, about eighty miles from Monterrey." He looked at the speedometer. "We've done half of that already."

"Linares might be a good place to stop for food," Slim said.

"Hey! That's right." Bill seemed surprised that someone other than himself had thought of it. "In the meantime, how about some orange juice?"

He passed the thermos around, Slim drinking his without taking his eyes off the road. "That tasted good," he said.

Roger handed the binoculars over to Diego. "Keep an eye peeled on the road behind you. You might see a car you recognize."

"We killed an hour in Monterrey," Bill said, "so the cars we noticed this morning should be ahead of us now. Shouldn't they?"

"Can't tell." Slim eased the car around a curve and stepped down hard on the accelerator as the asphalt ribbon climbed. "People stop in Monterrey for lunch."

"I don't see anything behind us but that bunch of burros we just passed," Diego said. "You can get a good view of the road every time you get to the top of a hill."

They swept along easily, the car seeming to relish the freedom that the smooth highway offered. There was almost no traffic, and the occasional bus or truck that they met made a welcome break in the monotony. The only obstacles to maintaining a mile-a-minute speed were the infrequent hamlets through which Slim drove slowly, because of the constant danger of a child or an animal suddenly darting out into the road.

It was a little after four when they caught their first

sight of Linares. It was a small town that concentrated its business district around the highway, its side streets fading off into open space within a few blocks of the main thoroughfare.

Slim pulled up to a gas station. "Might as well keep the tank filled. And it's also a good idea to make ourselves as obvious as possible." A youngster came out to attend to their wants. "Fill it up," Slim said.

"¿Como?" The boy looked completely bewildered.

Diego was just opening his mouth to translate when there was a loud horn blast behind them and Smith's roadster pulled up alongside.

Slim smiled. "Just in time. We're having a little trouble telling the boy here that we want him to fill the tank."

Smith said a few words rapidly in Spanish.

The boy grinned and nodded. "*Si. Hay mucha gasolina.*"

"Even I could understand that," Slim smiled. "He's got plenty— isn't that what he said?"

Smith nodded. "That's right. Sometimes trucking equipment is scarce here, and the deliveries get held up. I had my tank filled while I had lunch in Monterrey, but I think I'll take some more while I've got the chance."

"*Veinte litros,*" the attendant said to Slim. He pointed to the meter on the pump. "*Cinco pesos.*"

Slim looked at Diego and made a slight negative motion with his head. And Diego, again on the point of translating, remained silent.

"Twenty liters," Smith explained. "It'll cost you five pesos. That's not so expensive as it sounds, you know. Twenty liters is about five gallons, but a peso is only about

twenty cents, so you're paying about the same per gallon that you pay back in the States."

Slim handed over a five-peso note and added a copper.

"*Gracias, señor.*" The boy turned his attention to Smith's tank.

Slim pointed to a soft-drink cooler near the door of the service station building. "How about it? Anybody thirsty?"

"Sure. And besides that, I'm—" Slim cut Bill off abruptly.

"I'll get them." He fished four cold bottles out of the ice, opened them and brought them back to the car.

"*Un peso,*" the young Mexican told him, in response to his querying look.

A minute later, while they were still drinking, Smith paid for his gasoline and started his engine. "See you in Victoria. So long."

"Why didn't you let me translate?" Diego asked, as Smith's car moved away.

"And why only drinks?" Bill asked. "You said we'd eat in this town, didn't you?"

"Curiosity," Slim said. "I wanted to know if Smith would stall, too, or if he'd go on ahead. And as for Diego's Spanish, I just thought it might be well to keep that a secret. It may come in handy if no one knows Diego can understand and speak the language."

"Oh," Diego said. "O.K. I'll be careful about it."

Roger set the bottles in the rack and got back into the car. "You know," he said, "I've got a funny feeling there's something wrong—but I can't put my finger on it."

"Wrong about what?" Bill asked.

"I don't know what. That's the trouble."

"Let it go," Slim advised. "It'll pop up if you don't worry about it." He drove the car out onto the road again. "Keep your eyes open for a place to eat."

"There's one." Almost immediately Bill pointed to a restaurant on the left side of the street.

Slim shook his head. "Let's try another. I'd like to stop where we can keep an eye on the car—or better yet where the car is out of sight of the road."

"How about this?" Diego suggested a moment later. "It looks as if it's got a patio and maybe we can drive the car around the back."

Slim drew up, noticed a lane that led away from the main street, and swung down it to pull in at the rear of the patio. "This looks about right."

They got out of the car, walked into the patio from the rear, and seated themselves at a table under an overhanging roof that kept the sun off. It was peaceful and cool and quiet, with no other customers to disturb them. A waiter left the front part of the restaurant and approached their table.

"*Buenos días*," he said. He spread a fresh white tablecloth over the table and set out silverware and water glasses. He took four menus from an adjoining table and handed them around.

"Could you bring us some soda water?" Slim asked.

"*Si, señor.*"

"Why soda water, Slim?" Bill asked, as the man moved off.

"It's a good idea to stick to bottled stuff when you're in a strange country. The ordinary water's probably all right—the people who live here seem to thrive on it—but it may make us sick because we're not accustomed to it. The same goes for the milk. Unless you're sure it's

pasteurized, it's safer to insist on boiled milk." He opened his menu. "This ought to satisfy even you, Bill—four whole pages of food."

"Whew!" Bill whistled in anticipation. "Let me at it."

Diego grinned. "Think you can understand it?"

Bill looked up blankly. "It's all in Spanish!"

"Sure." Diego smiled. "Do you want *anguilas*?"

"What?" Roger asked.

"Or maybe some *jamón Argentino*? How about some *camarones*? Or some *jaiba*?"

"Wait a minute," Bill pleaded. "Tell us in English."

"*Anguilas* are eels. *Jamón Argentino* is Argentine ham. *Camarones* are shrimps, and *jaiba* is crab."

"I'll have shrimps," Bill said. "I hope it's shrimp cocktail."

They all agreed on shrimps for an appetizer and then Diego went through the rest of the menu. Bill chose chicken and rice, while the others settled on steak. Stewed fruit completed the order that Slim gave to the waiter in slow-spoken English.

"It is shrimp cocktail, with sauce," Bill chortled as the waiter brought their first dishes five minutes later. He dipped a shrimp into the sauce to get it well covered.

"Be careful," Diego warned. "That's—"

Bill had popped the shrimp into his mouth, but now he grabbed for the water and swallowed half a glass at a gulp. His face was fiery red and his eyes watered.

Diego handed him a piece of bread. "This'll help—if anything will." He was grinning. "I was trying to tell you it would probably be pretty hot."

"Wow!" Bill gasped. "Hot! What do they put in it? Dynamite?"

Roger and Slim were laughing.

"It's *salsa picante*—and it's not for amateurs." Diego's voice was mock sympathetic.

"I never thought I *was* an amateur—before," Bill muttered, cramming bread into his mouth. "Maybe I am down here though."

But the rest of the meal was much blander, and by the time they all settled back in their chairs to await dessert, Bill's face had faded out to its normal color.

"Boy! Was that good!" he said. "I think I'm going to like Mexico after all. You know, even that sauce is O.K. if you take it easy. I think I'll go into training on it—a little more each day. Maybe—"

Suddenly Diego leaned forward, and cocked his head as if in an effort to hear better. Bill stopped talking, and the others, aware of Diego's tenseness, almost held their breaths.

"Someone's asking if an American and three boys stopped here," Diego whispered.

"Who . . . ?"

"Shh." Diego was listening intently. "The waiter told him we were in the patio," he whispered a moment later. "And then the man said not to disturb us." Diego got to his feet. "I'll be back in a minute." He vanished out through the back entrance of the patio, leaving Slim and the boys to sit like frozen images at the table.

He came back almost as fast. "He was gone—couldn't see a sign of him. But the voice sounded familiar—like it might be the Mexican in the big car that stopped for us this morning."

"He was speaking English then, and now it was Spanish," Slim said slowly. "I wouldn't know." He looked at Roger and Bill who shook their heads helplessly.

They jumped when the waiter approached noiselessly

with their desserts, and waited tensely to see if he would mention the questioner. But he didn't. He merely gathered up their steak plates and went back into the building.

"Eat up," Slim said. "We've got to get going."

It might have been all the food they'd already eaten, or it might have been the sudden reminder of their predicament, but whatever it was they seemed to have lost their appetites. Even Bill's dessert plate was still half full when they left the patio and got back into the car.

The sun was dipping over the mountain on their right before they had gone very far, but there was no need for lights for over an hour, and by that time they had covered about half the distance to Victoria. Even after dark they found they could keep up their speed, because there was no traffic to speak of and Slim could hug the middle of the road in safety.

Roger peered at the dimly lighted speedometer. "We've come eighty-nine miles since we left Linares."

Slim glanced at his watch. "Making good time. "We ought to be there in fifteen minutes." He glanced at the rearview mirror and then began to slow down.

"What's up?" Bill asked.

Slim pulled the hand brake up. "If we're going to do a lot of driving tonight, I want to adjust those fog lights. They're pitched too low now." He opened the glove compartment on the dashboard and fumbled around. Something fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

"Uh-uh." Roger picked up Slim's heavy automatic pistol. "I didn't know you had it along."

"Force of habit, I guess. I'd forgotten about it myself." Slim put it back into the compartment and took out a pair of pliers. "This is what I was looking for." He flipped a switch and the amber fog lights threw a broad yellow

beam of light onto the road directly in front of the car. Then he turned off the headlights and got out.

He bent over the right fog light, loosened the clamp and moved the light around until its beam was pointing several hundred feet straight ahead. He repeated the operation with the left light, swinging it ahead and to the right so that it illuminated the shoulder of the road. "How does it look from here?" he asked, stepping back out of the way.

Roger slipped over into the driver's seat. "Pretty good."

"Now put the headlights on."

Roger pulled the knob and the brilliant white lights joined forces with the amber ones to paint the road with light for a distance of at least three hundred feet. "Swell. We ought to be able to make plenty of speed now, if we want to."

Slim flipped the fog lights off before he started the car, and fifteen minutes later they were driving down the main street of Ciudad Victoria, heading toward an electric sign in front of the hotel. Still two blocks away from it, Slim stopped.

"If we were ordinary tourists we'd simply drive up to the entrance and have our bags taken inside and the car put away. But we don't want to do that, so we'd better do a little snooping to see what's what."

"I'll go, Slim," Diego said.

"O.K. We want a parking place near the entrance, and in a well-lighted spot, so that nobody would be able to remove the money without being seen."

Diego slipped out of the car and disappeared among the shadows of the trees that lined the sidewalk. They could see him occasionally, silhouetted against the glare of lights, but they eventually lost sight of him completely.

"We seem to be in front of a park," Bill said, and just as he completed the sentence there was a crash of cymbals and a band began to play.

"No doubt of it now," Slim said. "Look in through the trees." He pointed off to the right where lights had come on.

"There's a bandstand lit up like a Christmas tree," Roger said.

They listened to the gay music until Diego suddenly reappeared.

"What's the dope?" Slim asked.

"The hotel is on a corner and it has two entrances, one on this street and another on the side street. The hotel garage is on this street, a block farther down. Nobody's allowed to park on this street, because it's the main highway, but you can pull up in front of the side entrance and park there. There are about half a dozen cars there now."

"Anybody's we know?" Bill asked.

"Smith's and the big sedan the Mexican was driving."

"Any room for ours?" Slim asked.

"Yeah. Right between those two."

Slim chuckled. "Might be a good spot at that." He reached for the key, but his hand shifted direction in mid-air and went instead to the glove compartment. "I'd better lock this." Then he started the car and a minute later he was swinging down the side street and nosing into the parking place Diego had discovered.

"Take your bags and follow me in. Let me do the talking, especially if someone offers to put the car away." Slim chuckled again. "This is fine—just what the doctor ordered. Secluded enough for us later on, and too public for anyone to monkey with the car."

The first person they saw in the lobby was Smith, reading a magazine in one of the big soft chairs.

"See you made it," he said. "Better hurry up, the dining room closes in half an hour."

"We'll be down in a minute." Slim led the way to the desk, where he signed the registration card and asked for two connecting rooms with baths.

The clerk nodded and summoned a bellboy, who picked up the bags and led the way to an elevator.

They rode up to the second floor and followed the boy down the hall toward the side of the hotel overlooking the street they were parked on. The doors were unlocked, the shades drawn and the rooms checked over.

"The windows, please," the bellboy said, "do not open." He pointed to a grill in the wall. "Air condition." He accepted the tip Slim offered and left.

"Nice and cool in here," Bill said. "They were right about this being a good hotel."

Roger was already stretched out across one of the beds. "Too bad we can't stay here all night."

"Keep it quiet," Slim cautioned. "Air conditioning ducts carry voices, you know." He walked over to the window and looked down. "There's our car. It sure must be bothering someone."

"What about something to eat?"

Slim laughed. "Now it's Diego who's hungry."

"It's not that I'm so hungry," Diego answered, "but won't it look funny if we don't eat?"

"We're not going down to the dining room, though." Slim picked up the telephone. "I'm going to have supper sent up here." He spoke into the mouthpiece. "Room service." There was a momentary pause and then he started again. "This is Room 204. Please send up four

orders of chicken soup. Do you have any cold cuts?" Slim waited again. "Good. Send up two orders of cold cuts and two orders of roast turkey. "We'll want four bottles of soda, and two pots of coffee. Yes, Room 204." He cradled the phone.

"Why can't we go down?" Bill asked. "And anyway, I had chicken today. I'd rather have steak or something."

"That's just too bad," Slim told him calmly. "If we're going to drive all night we'll want some food, and it would look peculiar if we ate downstairs and then asked the waiter to make up sandwiches for us to bring up here. This way we'll make our own sandwiches out of the cold cuts and the bread they'll send along. We'll put the coffee in the thermos and take along the soda, too."

"How are we going to get out of here?" Roger asked.

"That's what I'm going to find out now. You kids get washed up while I go downstairs."

Diego looked inside the bathroom and eyed the stall shower yearningly.

"Go ahead," Roger said. "We've got time."

Five minutes later, Diego and Bill were toweling themselves while Roger took his shower. When Slim came back, all three of them were fully dressed and ready.

"The food should be up in a couple of minutes," Slim said. "I think I'll get showered, too. It'll help keep me awake." He began to take off his clothes.

"What are you smiling about?" Roger asked. "You look like the cat that ate the canary."

Slim winked. "It's working out all right. I think I know who's after us, now."

"Who?" They all stared at him.

"Well, you see, as long as our car is right outside there it's practically impossible to get at it. So I figured that

whoever was interested in the money would have to get me to have the car put into the garage."

"And who did?" Roger asked.

"The Mexican."

"I told you so!" Bill cried triumphantly.

"Let Slim talk." Roger looked at his younger brother disgustedly. "With all the guessing you do, you'd have to be right sometime."

"He was most solicitous," Slim continued. "He came up and said I shouldn't leave the car out on the street all night. I said I thought it was all right, especially since his was parked there, too."

"How did he get around that?" Diego wanted to know.

"Very smoothly. He said that his car was a sedan and could be locked, while our convertible offered no protection because anybody could slit the canvas open and unlock the doors."

Slim grinned. "So I allowed myself to be convinced. I said that we'd ordered supper upstairs because you kids were tired out, and as soon as we finished I'd come down and put the car away. He started to say something about the hotel doing it for me, but I got away before he could finish it."

"Well!" Roger said. "That helps. Now we know who to look out for."

There was a knock on the door and in response to Slim's "Come in," a waiter entered pushing a serving wagon full of covered dishes.

"We'll take care of it," Slim said as the waiter started to set up a table. "Do you have the check?"

"*Si, señor.* Please to sign."

"I'll pay for it."

When the waiter had gone, Slim became very business-

like. "Use the cold cuts to make sandwiches. Drink the rest of the orange juice, rinse the thermos and fill it with coffee." He crossed the room in his bare feet and opened the drawer of a desk. "Use this stationery to wrap the sandwiches in. Pack them and the thermos and three bottles of soda in our bags. We'll do with one bottle and the rest of the coffee now."

He disappeared into the bathroom and they heard the shower start.

"Let's get going," Roger said. "You two make up the sandwiches, I'll take care of the thermos."

When Slim reappeared, showered and shaved, the sandwiches were already packed away and the table set with the balance of the food.

"Did you find a way of getting out of here?" Roger asked, as they began to eat.

Slim nodded, his mouth full of bread. "It's not too difficult," he said when he had swallowed. "There's a stairway at the end of the hall. Walk down the two flights and you come to another hallway. If you turn right, you'll come out in the lobby—so don't do it. If you turn left you'll go out the rear of the hotel into an alley. Turn left again and you'll come out at the back of the hotel garage."

They cleaned up all the food, dividing the bottle of soda among the three boys, while Slim drank the cup of coffee left over after the thermos had been filled.

"It's a good thing Mexicans serve big portions," Bill said, finishing his turkey.

"Now," the detective said, pushing back his chair. "Here's the plan. You take all the bags and get outside to the back of the hotel. Don't make a mistake or you'll mess things up. I'll go down in the elevator and walk through

the lobby. I'll drive the car around past the front of the hotel toward the garage, but instead of going into the garage I'll drive to the alley where you'll be waiting. Then I'll go back to the lobby and take the elevator upstairs again. When I get up here, I'll duck down the stairs and meet you outside. That'll throw him off the track. I'm hoping he'll wait until he's sure we're asleep before he goes to the garage, and we'll leave the light on in the rooms to make him wait as long as possible."

"I'm afraid," Roger said, "that we won't get a three-hour start, even so. He looks pretty smart to me."

"I know. But even an hour will help," Slim replied. "We can probably drive as fast as he can." He crossed over to the desk again and took an envelope out of the drawer into which he placed some money. When he sealed it, he wrote **MANAGER** on its face and left it on the desk with their keys. "That'll pay for the rooms." He took a quick look around. "I guess we're all set."

The boys picked up the baggage and went to the door. Slim opened it carefully and peered out, then he motioned them on. He pointed to a red exit light that gleamed at the end of the corridor and as they tiptoed toward it, he shut the door behind him.

Keeping as silent as possible, the boys crept down the cement stairs to the bottom. When they reached the lower hall they could hear a dim buzz of voices from the lobby to their right. Roger led the way to the left and out into the alley. It was inky black there, although they could see lights in the streets at either end of the narrow passageway. They started toward the left, hugging the wall, but Roger suddenly stopped.

"Wait here a minute." He set his bag down and retraced his steps, heading back toward the street on which

the car was parked. They saw him for a split second outlined against the light at the end of the alley, and then he disappeared. A minute later he was with them again.

"What . . . ?" Diego started.

"Not here," Roger whispered. "I'll tell you later."

They reached the mouth of the alley just in time to see Slim pull up. The car lights were off.

"Roger," Slim whispered.

"Here we are, Slim."

"Get in. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

They sat in the darkness, with the gentle purr of the idling motor sounding in their ears. And then Slim materialized silently and got under the wheel. Still running without lights, he went down the side street to the first corner, turned left, and then left again at the end of the block. Twenty feet short of the next corner he stopped the car and got out to walk to the intersection. He was back in a moment.

"All clear." He turned right on the main street and they were off again.

"We made it," Bill said, still keeping his voice hushed.

"So far," Slim added.

"Where did you disappear to, Roger?" Diego asked.

"What's this?" Slim took his eyes off the road for a moment to look at the boy beside him.

"I just thought of a way to give us more time," Roger said. "I sneaked out and loosened the valve on one of the rear tires on the Mexican's car. It'll be flat in a couple of hours."

Slim smiled reluctantly. "As a law-abiding citizen I can't officially approve, but maybe under the circumstances it was a good idea."

"I wish I'd done the same thing on one of Smith's tires," Roger said suddenly.

"Smith's?" Bill asked. "What for? That'd be a dirty trick."

"Yeah, why Smith?" Slim asked curiously.

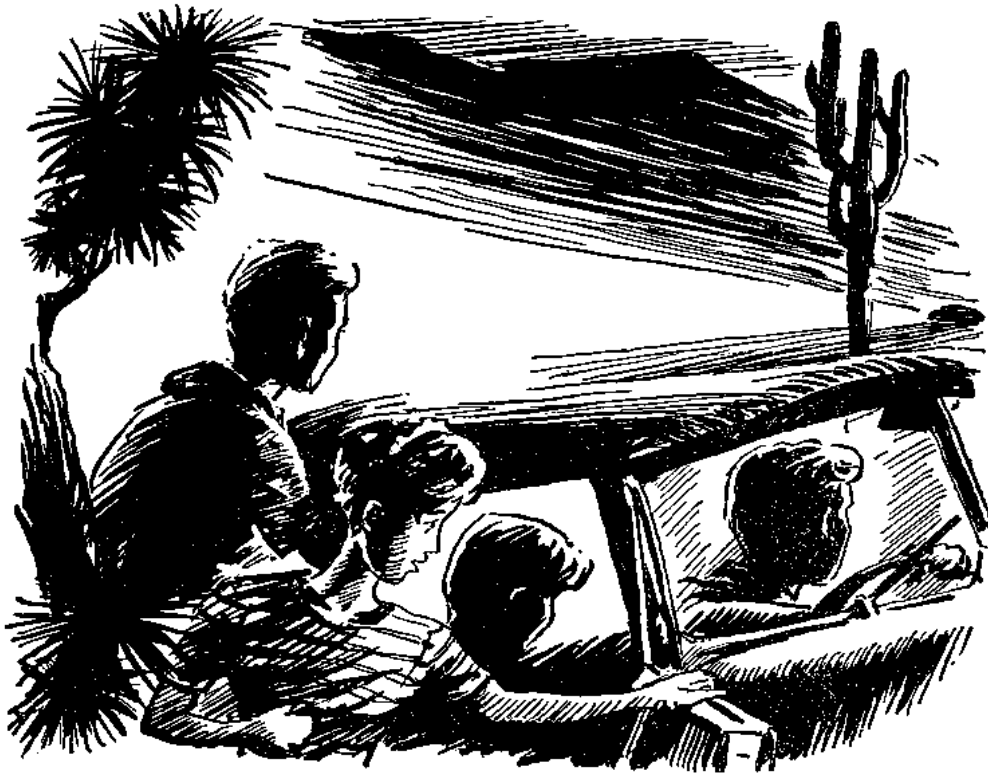
"I just remembered what it was I couldn't think of back at Linares. Remember I said something was bothering me?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Well, we were keeping an eye out all the way from Monterrey, and we didn't see any car behind us as we approached Linares. Did we?"

"No. I was looking." Diego sounded positive.

"Then how did Smith get to the gas station so quickly after we got there? Unless he was there first, on one of the side streets waiting for us to go past?"



CHAPTER FOUR

"THAT'S AN INTERESTING idea, Rog," Slim said thoughtfully. "You may have something there. File it away with all the rest of the stuff we don't really understand about this business. I can't even try to figure it out now. I've got to keep my mind on my driving."

Smoothly, the car hummed over the black asphalt, the headlights and fog lights combining to throw a brilliant splash of light far ahead. Slim kept the speedometer needle anchored over the fifty-mile mark except for those stretches of the road that were unmistakably straight. There he edged it up to sixty and sometimes higher.

Roger, who was checking miles against minutes, announced that they had covered twenty-three miles during their first half hour.

"Not bad," Slim said. "We lost some time getting out of Victoria."

Up ahead two pin points of greenish light loomed up for an instant and then vanished as a rabbit or a cat scuttled across the road.

"I hope burros don't sleep on the road at night," Bill said.

"Keep your eyes peeled—all of you," Slim directed.

"Sleepy?" Diego asked.

Slim shook his head. "Not yet. And there's always the coffee, you know."

"We're picking up some time." Roger broke a ten-minute silence. "Thirty-nine miles in forty-five minutes."

"If the Mexican has discovered that we're gone," Diego said, "he'll be after us already, driving as fast as we are—maybe faster, because he might know the road better."

"He'll have to stop and change that tire," Bill reminded them. "That's half an hour, isn't it?"

Slim eased the car around a long curve, keeping the speed just below the tire-squealing point. "Fifteen minutes if he knows how—and he probably does."

They fell silent then, listening to the roar of the wind and the hum of the tires, a monotonous sound that was punctuated at intervals by the pop of an insect against the windshield.

"We've been going an hour," Roger said. "Doing all right, too—fifty-three miles."

Slim slowed down as a white sign flashed by.

"What's that mean?" Bill asked. "*Poblado Próximo.*"

"Town ahead," Diego translated.

"There's nothing on the map," Roger said.

"Probably too small to put on a map," Slim pointed out. At thirty miles an hour, he maneuvered the car

through the little hamlet that sprawled for a thousand feet along the highway. There was a sharp left turn at the southern end of the town and another sign came up, white in the blackness.

"*Puente Angosto*, narrow bridge," Diego said.

The car rattled across a steel span, the vibration setting all of the bridge tie rods to clanging. Slim allowed the car to pick up speed as the road straightened out and began a gentle climb. "Keep an eye open for headlights behind us. We don't want to underestimate the Mexican's intelligence or driving ability."

"I can see the few lights of that last town," Bill said a moment later, "but no headlights."

Another ten minutes rushed by as the car dipped over the crest of the long hill and began to drop. Slim eased off as the speedometer showed them doing almost seventy miles an hour. He slowed down still more to bump across a railroad crossing and then speeded up again.

"Something's coming," Roger said.

"Looks like a truck," Slim answered, as the headlights rushed toward them. He pressed down on the horn button and the blast resounded in the night. Obliging, the truck moved over to the extreme edge of the highway and they swept by. It was a big trailer, and its tractor was roaring as they passed it.

"We did twelve miles in the last fifteen minutes. We've got about twenty miles to go to a town called Mante."

"I'll have a little coffee now," Slim said. "I'm not getting sleepy, but I don't want to wait until I do."

Bill got the thermos out of the bag and began to unscrew the top. "Going to drink it while you're driving?"

"Sure. Don't fill the cup more than halfway."

Bill was just handing the paper cup to Roger to give to Slim when Diego clutched his arm, almost spilling the hot liquid.

"Headlights," he said.

"Never mind the coffee," Slim ordered. "Can you still see them?"

"No. They were a long way behind."

"Keep looking."

"There they are again," Bill said a moment later. He was kneeling on the back seat and looking intently at the blackness behind them. "Just got a glimpse of them."

"How far back?"

"It's hard to tell. Maybe three or four miles. What do you think, Diego?"

"We saw them only for a second so I don't know. I think Bill's guess is pretty good."

The car began to climb again as the road ran up the side of a hill on slant. "We might get another glimpse of them from the top of this hill," Slim said. "Keep track of the mileage on the hill, Roger."

The road went up without a turn for a mile and six tenths before it began to dip.

"Can't see them," Diego said as they nosed over the crest.

A white sign flashed by. Roger repeated the words. "*Velocidad Máxima One Hundred Kilómetros.*"

"Maximum speed one hundred kilometers," Slim said. "That's about sixty-two miles an hour. The road must be straight and flat along here." He glanced toward Roger. "Note the mileage from the crest. I'm going to open it up."

The road ran like a straight line and Slim kept the car accelerating until the needle was flirting with the eighty-

five-mile-an-hour mark. The tenths on the speedometer went around at a dizzy pace as the car hurtled on through the dark.

"Two miles," Roger said.

"Nothing back here."

"Three miles," Roger said again in what seemed to be not more than half a minute. "We're doing almost ninety miles an hour, Slim."

The car answered for Slim as it surged forward even faster.

"Four miles."

"No lights," Diego said.

"Maybe they turned off someplace." Bill sounded hopeful.

Silence for the space of seconds and then: "Five miles."

And almost at the same time Diego cried. "Headlights just coming over the top of the hill."

"We've got a five mile lead, huh?" Slim kept his eyes on the road. "He must have been driving like a fool—if it is the Mexican. We might as well assume it is, I suppose. No truck could go that fast—and no ordinary traveler would."

"We can't keep this up, can we?" Roger asked.

"Not for long. And if he knows the road better than we do he'll gain all the time." He thought a moment. "Get the map."

"Got it."

"See if there's any road leading off the highway. Maybe we can duck him."

"There is!" Roger's voice was loud with excitement. "At Mante there's a road leading off to the left to Tampico." He checked the speedometer again. "Mante is about ten miles from here."

"How are the lights?" Slim asked.

"Still there," Bill reported. "I don't think he's gaining on us."

"It doesn't look like it," Diego agreed. "Maybe we can beat him."

"We might possibly on a straight stretch like this," Slim said. "But once we get in the hills his knowledge of the road will give him too great an advantage. We've got to get off this highway." He swung the car around a long curve. "Good. That'll keep us out of sight for awhile. We don't want him to see us take the left fork."

"Mante ought to be coming up soon," Roger said.

"Here comes a sign, Diego."

"*Empalme*, junction," Diego read.

"This is it. We take the left?"

"That's right."

There was a cluster of signs alongside the road, one with a big arrow pointing to the left with the word TAMPICO 156 KMS painted on it. Slim took the curve with scarcely any slackening of speed, and the tires screamed. All the loose luggage swept over to the right side of the car as it swayed with the violence of the turn.

"What are we going to do in Tampico?" Roger asked after he got his breath back.

"Not going to Tampico," Slim grunted. "We're stopping right here." With the headlights off he swung the car across the road and then backed up to allow himself room to complete the turn. They waited a moment to get their eyes accustomed to the darkness and then Slim got out to investigate the field that bordered the road. It was flat, and sun baked into a cementlike hardness.

Slim nosed the car off the road onto the hard earth and

then drove slowly until he was about two hundred feet from the road before he stopped. "That ought to be far enough to put us out of sight. There's no moon tonight." "What are we going to do?" In the silence Bill's voice sounded thin and a little wavery.

"We're going to wait until our friend passes the road junction. Then we'll go back and continue our trip." Slim looked at the radium face of his watch. "He should be going by any minute now."

"I can't see a thing," Diego said. "I'm not even sure where the main road is."

Slim pointed toward their left, his arm barely visible against the sky.

"Look!" Roger dropped his voice as if he could be overheard. "There's the lights."

The car came on fast along the main road, and although it was difficult to judge speed at that distance they could understand how they had been overtaken: The car seemed to be doing a hundred miles an hour.

"He's going right by the junction!" Bill said.

But as he spoke, the car seemed to slow down suddenly and then it stopped. The screech of tires reached them across the thousand feet that separated them from the main highway.

"What—?" Roger stopped as Slim held up his hand.

"Slim!" Diego whispered. "He's backing up!"

Diego was right. The car that had been following them had reversed several hundred feet and stopped again. When it started, its lights swung toward them—the car was coming down the Tampico Road just as they had done.

They watched it as it picked up speed, its headlights

feeling far out in front like the antenna of an insect. It passed them with a roar that reached them where they were hidden far off the road.

"It's the Mexican, all right," Roger said. "I could recognize the car by the reflection of its own headlights."

"But Slim," Bill asked, "how did he know . . .?"

"Somebody told him," Diego said.

Bill turned toward him. "What? What makes you—?"

"Keep it quiet a minute," Slim interrupted. "There's another car coming."

"This can't have anything to do with us," Roger said.

They watched a second car sweep down the main road toward the junction. It, too, was bowling along at a fast clip, but it began to slow up before it reached the Tampico cutoff. And then it swung toward them and began to pick up speed. A moment later it whizzed past.

The noise of its passing gave way to a complete silence that closed in on them like the darkness.

Slim spoke finally, and his voice seemed as somber as the night itself. "Can't have anything to do with us, Roger? Unless I'm going blind, that was Smith's car."

"Yeah." It was more a whisper than a spoken word. "That's what it looked like to me."

"It begins to make a little sense," Slim said softly. "Some of it anyway. We *did* underestimate the intelligence of our enemies—and the size of the organization as well. They've got men posted on the road watching for us. That's why we never got as much of a head start as we figured on."

"That's what I meant when I said someone told him we turned off," Diego said. "There must be a watcher at the turnoff."

"And there must have been one in Victoria, too," Slim

agreed. "I'll bet the Mexican was told of our departure within five minutes after we left. If you hadn't fixed his tire, Roger, he'd have caught up with us long before this."

"But what about Smith? Is he in on this, too?" Bill sounded incredulous.

"That's something we don't know yet—and it doesn't make much difference at the moment because our big job is getting to Mexico City before we're caught."

"Of course," Roger said, "we'll be spotted by that watcher if we go back to the main road again."

"I'm figuring on that," was Slim's answer. "The question is how much start will that give us?"

"You mean," Diego asked, "how far down this Tampico Road will the Mexican go before he knows we're not ahead of him any more?"

"That's it. I don't think he'll have men posted along this road—he'd probably concentrate his watchers on the main road only. So, if we're in luck, he may have to go all the way into Tampico before he knows we're someplace else."

Bill spoke up excitedly. "The sign back there said Tampico was one hundred fifty-six kilometers. That's—" he figured in his head—"almost one hundred miles. Two hours!"

"Four hours," Diego corrected, "because he has to backtrack, too. That'll make it nearer two hundred miles."

"I think we can turn the dash light," Slim said. "I want to get a look at that map."

He bent over to examine the spread-out sheet. "Not so good, boys. He'll find out long before he gets to Tampico. Look. See this?"

They all looked at the point indicated by his finger.

"See? A ferry about forty kilometers from here. That's where he'll learn we didn't go that way."

"About thirty-five minutes," Roger said. "Add thirty-five minutes for the return trip, and we have seventy minutes' start."

"We've wasted almost five already." Diego sat back on the seat. "Maybe we'd better get started again."

"No use getting panicky. We can afford to waste another minute." The calmness in Slim's voice relaxed all of them a little. "We can't go on running this way. An hour's start isn't enough. We've got to use our wits. Where's the next place we can turn off the main road?"

"Twenty miles past this one," Roger said. "A town called Antiguo Morelos. But what's the use, Slim? We'd probably be spotted there, too, and if we turn off we'll be on a small road without a chance of help."

"Unless we can fool him."

"But how?" Bill leaned forward again to get into the little circle of light.

"There may be a way," Diego said, breaking a long silence. "Maybe we can disguise ourselves when we pass the spotter."

"How can you disguise a car?" Roger asked.

"Wait a minute, Roger. Maybe Diego's right."

"I don't know if it's worth anything, but suppose we go back to the main road and head toward Mexico City. We drive as fast as we can to the next cutoff. Then suppose we stop at the junction and get out to look at the signs—give whoever's watching there a good chance to get a look at us and at the car."

"That doesn't sound very smart to me," Bill said. "He'll never forget us if you give him such a good chance to see us."

"That's what we want him to do," Diego continued. "After we look at the signs we'll get back into the car and proceed toward Mexico City. When we go down the road a couple of miles we'll turn around and head back."

"Where does the disguise come in?"

"Quiet, Bill. Let Diego finish. We're wasting time."

"O.K." Bill sounded abashed.

"When we turn around, we'll turn off the fog lights and disconnect one headlight. We'll disconnect the tail-lights, too, and maybe we could smear some mud over the one headlight so that it doesn't throw too much light around. Then we'll put the top down and you three hide. I'll drive. And we'll make the turnoff."

Slim thought a moment. "Not bad. The watcher will see four of us in a closed car with four headlights. When we come back we'll have only one headlight and the car will look like a touring car in the dark. And there'll be one instead of four."

"And I'll be singing a Mexican song when we make the turn," Diego answered. "That might make him think I'm a native."

"I say we try it," Roger said.

"Wait a minute. Where does this cutoff go? It might be a dead end and we'd be trapped." Slim bent over the map again.

Roger traced the route with a pencil. "It goes through a town called Ciudad de Maiz, and then through another place called Hidalgo, and from there it goes on to what looks like a big city, San Luis Potosí."

"Hidalgo!" Diego exclaimed. "That's near the town my father and mother came from. He leaned forward excitedly. "Remember I told you about it back home?"

"Sure, I remember," Slim said. "You have relatives there, haven't you?"

"Some aunts and uncles." Diego reached out and grabbed Slim's arm. "And if we had to, we could hide out there for a couple of days."

"We don't want to involve anybody else in this mess," Slim said firmly. "But look!" Roger was pointing to the map again. "There's a road that goes from San Luis Potosí down to Mexico City. It's not a first-class road, but—"

"All the better," Bill pointed out. "They won't expect tourists to take it then."

Slim thought it over a minute. Then he said: "O.K. with me. Unless someone has a better idea. Don't all speak at once," he added, as they shook their heads in unison.

He got the car back on the road again and headed it toward the highway, taking the turn slowly as the boys watched for some glimpse of the spotter they were sure was hidden somewhere near by.

"Couldn't see a thing," Roger reported. "Must be behind a cactus or something."

"Don't worry about him," Slim advised. "It's the next one we have to fool."

They covered eighteen miles at a rapid rate and then Slim slowed down a little. Two more miles went by and then they saw the distant flash of white that meant a sign ahead.

"There it is," Roger called out. "The junction must be coming up."

Another hundred feet and they came to it, a narrow graveled road leading off to the right into the hills. Slim stopped the car so that its lights fell on the signboard. They all got out and read the sign, making sure that they were clearly visible to anyone who might be watching.

"Straight ahead," Slim said loudly. "To Mexico City."

They got into the car again and drove off rapidly. Two miles farther on, Slim turned the car around and stopped.

"Hop to it. Smear the right headlight with mud—that's the one I'll leave on." He lifted the hood and disconnected the left headlight. Then he opened the luggage compartment in the rear and killed the two taillights and the license plate light.

After he and Roger had unclamped the top and got it folded back, Slim stepped back a few paces to look at it. "I think we'll get away with it. Take over, Diego."

They got in, Slim in the back crouched down in the seat with Bill on the floor beside him, and Roger down on the floor beside Diego.

Diego started the motor and the car began to move back toward the junction. When they were about half a mile away, Diego began to sing a Mexican song in a loud voice, which grew even louder as the side road loomed up in the dim glow of one dirty headlight. Without any slackening of speed, he swung off the main highway onto the gravel road and kept going.

"Hey!" Roger said after five minutes on the rough road. "Aren't we far enough to stop?"

Diego pulled over to the side and brought the car to a halt. Groaning, Slim and the two boys got out in the road and stretched.

"I'll never stand up straight again," Bill complained. "What bumps!"

"Don't worry about the road," Slim answered. "We have to get moving again. We haven't thrown him—or them—off the track entirely, you know. Sooner or later they'll find out we're not on the Pan-American Highway, and then they'll realize we took this road."

They cleaned and reconnected the lights and put the top up again, and they all had a cup of coffee and a sandwich. That took fifteen minutes, all the time Slim would allow. And then they started off again. They began to climb almost immediately.

"If we're averaging thirty miles an hour we're doing good," Slim said after a while.

"We're not," Roger answered, consulting his watch and the speedometer. "We did about ten miles in the last thirty minutes."

Slim grunted by way of reply and pulled the car around a hairpin turn, only to find that the road turned right back on itself the next moment. "My arms won't last long at this rate."

Diego, sitting on the right, tried to look out over the edge of the road, but the blackness covered everything. "I wonder how far down we'd go if we went over?"

Slim shifted into second speed. "I'm just as glad we can't see what's down there."

They lapsed into silence, but after a few minutes Slim spoke again. "Don't stop talking. I'll get sleepy."

"What do you want to talk about?" Roger asked, stifling a yawn.

"What about Smith?" Bill asked. "Do you really think he's in the gang?"

"Could be," Slim admitted, "but I doubt it. His car came along about a minute after the Mexican's. If they were in it together why wouldn't they ride together?"

Smith wasn't even close on his tail—he must have been at least a mile behind.”

“But if they aren't partners,” Roger asked, “how did Smith know we were gone?”

“Yeah,” Diego added. “And how did he know we turned off the highway?”

Slim shifted back to high as the car reached the top of a hill, and almost immediately shifted back to second as they began to descend again rapidly. “He could have been watching the Mexican—not us. He was close enough behind him for that. Maybe there are two gangs after the money. Who knows?”

“Boy!” Bill complained. “I'm falling asleep back here.”

“It's getting cold, too.” Diego cranked up his window. “We must be a couple of thousand feet up.”

“Put your windbreakers on,” Slim directed. “And keep the windows open or I'll fall asleep.”

The road wound on endlessly, climbing up and then dropping down, but seeming, on the whole, to be carrying them higher and higher. Slim was the only one who kept warm: The exertion of swinging the wheel back and forth saw to that. But it was becoming more difficult to concentrate on the road, and he knew that a second's inattention might land them hundreds of feet down the mountainside.

When they pulled into Ciudad de Maiz after almost two hours of backbreaking driving, he stopped the car on the completely deserted main street.

“Get out the coffee while I empty one of our gas cans into the tank.”

They sat in the car for five minutes, warming their hands on the hot paper cups, trying to rouse their flagging energies. Slim seemed to recuperate somewhat, and

when he drove out of the town there was a little spirit in the car again.

But it didn't last long. At the end of another hour, Slim was fighting hard to stay awake, and losing the battle. He roused Roger. "Look for a wide spot or wagon trail going off the road. I can't go much farther."

They saw one, a few miles farther on, a crooked pair of ruts leading off the road toward the left. Slim stopped the car and got out to investigate with a flashlight.

"Not bad," he said when he returned. "It goes through the trees and makes a turn about fifty feet in. We'll be well hidden there."

The jouncing of the car woke Bill and Diego. "Where are we?"

"Going to hole up for the night," Roger explained. "Slim can't drive any more."

"We get to Hidalgo yet?" Diego asked sleepily.

"We should be about ninety miles from there."

Slim stopped the car and shut off the motor. "Counterfeiters or no counterfeiters," he said. "I'm going to sleep."

"My father always said this was good hunting country," Diego mumbled. "Mountain lions and everything."

"This is a fine time to tell us that," Bill muttered, making sure his window was tightly closed. But he was speaking to himself. The rest were already sound asleep.



CHAPTER FIVE

THERE WAS SOME sort of tapping going on, Roger realized, a persistent tap-tap on glass. He stirred uneasily in a half-sleep and then opened his eyes. In a split second, he was wide awake, his hand groping desperately for Slim. There was a wrinkled, brown Mexican face pressed against the window.

"Slim," Roger said hoarsely. "Slim!"

Slim came awake instantly. "What's up?" He turned and saw the Mexican outside of the car. "Uh-uh. Who's this?"

Roger turned and nudged Diego into partial consciousness. "Talk to him. Find out what he wants."

Diego shook his head to clear it, and then rubbed his

eyes free of sleep. "Well, open the window. I can't talk through it."

When Roger had cranked the window down, Diego leaned forward and let loose with a volley of Spanish. The Mexican grinned pleasantly, obviously relieved at finding someone who could speak his language. He gestured behind him as he talked, and for the first time they noticed that there were three loaded burros patiently waiting in the narrow lane.

"You're blocking his road," Diego said finally. "He can't get the animals through."

"Oh." Slim looked out of his window. "No room to pull over. We'll have to back out."

Diego repeated this to the Mexican who smiled again and went back to his burros.

Slim started the motor and began to edge the car backward over the rough trail. When he came to the graveled road, he swung out onto it. The Mexican, his burros moving slowly before him, passed them with a polite wave.

"Ask him how far it is to Hidalgo," Slim said.

Diego translated the question and the Mexican stopped and came back to the car. He spoke to Diego, his head moving from side to side.

Diego turned back to Slim. "He doesn't know exactly, but he said it's maybe one hundred fifty kilometers."

"That's a long way to go for breakfast," Slim said.

"You can say that again," Bill spoke for the first time since he'd been awakened.

Diego said something to the Mexican, listened to his answer and then turned to Slim again. "He says he's got some bananas he's taking to market."

"Better than nothing. I think there's a swallow of coffee left, and a bottle of soda."

Two bunches of bananas and some coins changed hands and then Slim pulled the car back into the lane and out of sight of anyone on the highway. "Now, let's eat."

It was almost seven o'clock, Roger noticed, and the morning sun was making an appearance over the tops of the mountains that surrounded them completely. As the slanting rays penetrated the trees the chill began to give way to a more pleasant warmth.

"Doesn't seem possible that a couple of hours ago we were being chased," Roger said.

Slim grinned at him. "Feels a little safer in bright daylight, huh?"

Bill handed each of them a chocolate bar. "Dessert."

"It *feels* safer," Diego agreed, "but is it really?"

"I think so." Slim drained the last of the coffee and recapped the thermos bottle. "There are a lot of things people will do at night that they wouldn't dare in bright daylight. And that's why we have to make time today—we have to cover as much ground as we can before nightfall, and when darkness arrives we have to be holed up safely."

"What about the plan we had last night?" Roger asked. "You know, to go on this road to San Luis Potosí and then take the back road into Mexico City."

Slim nodded. "Still sounds good to me. But when we get to Hidalgo I want to try and call the Consulate in Mexico City. Even if I have to talk to ten clerks first, I'm going to tell this story to some responsible person."

Bill threw the chocolate wrapper out of the window.

"I bet we lost them entirely. They'll never find us on this back road."

"I wouldn't bet on it. If they were watching the main road as carefully as it seemed," Diego said, "they'll soon know we didn't continue that way, and there's no other road we could have taken except this one."

"And that means that they're probably ahead of us on this road right now," Roger concluded.

"That's right," Bill complained. "Spoil my breakfast—as if it needed any spoiling."

Slim swallowed a bite of chocolate. "I think we can assume they are ahead of us—at last we ought to consider the possibility. The point is—how far ahead? Suppose it took them as long as three hours to make sure we had left the Pan-American Highway?"

"But we stopped, Slim. And they must have kept on driving."

"Sure, Roger. From our actions, they must be pretty sure that we know they're after us. Thereafter, they should assume that we'd waste no time in putting as much distance as possible between us and them. So they probably kept on going all night, thinking that we were still ahead."

"If that's so," Bill asked, "why can't we go back to the Pan-American Highway and take a good road down to Mexico City?"

"That road's probably still being watched," Roger reminded him.

"So you mean we should go right on to Hidalgo as we planned, but go slowly enough not to catch up to them. Huh?" Diego asked.

Slim nodded. "When I get to speak to the Consul I'll

tell him what we're planning, and unless he's got a better idea we'll carry on."

"Let's take a look at the map first." Roger unfolded it on his lap. "We must be about here, I guess. We go through Hidalgo, then San Luis Potosí, and then we turn due south and head for Querétaro. Then we go to San Juan del Rio and then turn toward Mexico City."

"Right." Slim started the car again and backed out onto the road. "And we musn't forget to fill the spare gas cans the next time we get gas."

Now it was light and they could see something of the country through which they were passing. The road, as it had done during the night, rose and fell endlessly as it clung precariously to the mountain sides. Sometimes they went downhill for three or four miles in second speed, only to start right up again with the motor straining to maintain twenty-five miles an hour.

It took them miles to go from crest to crest although the distance as the crow flies was often only half a mile; and almost always they could see, far down the mountain-side, the road they had just traveled over or the road they would soon be on. When Slim swung around curves the boys could look out of the windows and see the rocky walls falling away for thousands of feet before they reached the wooded ravines and valleys.

There were few villages along the route, and those clung to the hills in the few wide spots along the road. Occasionally they could see isolated huts high above them on the steep sides of the mountains.

"Look," Bill said pointing upward. "There's a man working way up there."

"Don't see how he manages to hang on, let alone get

there," Roger said. "And what do they grow up there anyway?"

"And why?" Bill added. "Gosh! We've passed enough good flatland. Why don't they use that instead of the sides of the mountains?"

"My father told me about that," Diego said. "It's because those fields are so high that the clouds supply plenty of moisture for crops even during the dry season."

Slim dropped into second to make a long hill that seemed to end up in the clouds. "Sorry I can't look at the scenery," he grinned. "I've got my hands full keeping the car on the road." He glanced at the temperature indicator on the instrument panel. "We're heating up a little. Wouldn't mind a chance to stop and maybe get some water."

"We could try the next village," Diego suggested.

Slim pulled the gearshift lever back into high as the road flattened out a little and the speedometer needle climbed. They finally reached the crest where the road doubled back on itself and dropped down through wisps of morning mist. Back into second speed went the gearshift and the motor whined with the strain of bucking the momentum. The temperature of the motor dropped rapidly.

Roger pointed ahead across a valley. "If that's our road we'll be passing a village pretty soon."

They reached it at the top of the next rise when the gurgling of the motor testified to its heat. Slim pulled over to the side and turned off the ignition. "We'll let her cool off awhile. Maybe we can get some water."

A head popped out of one of the little huts and a moment later a young boy ran across toward them. "*Agua, señor? Agua?*"

Slim nodded and the youngster ran back to the house to reappear a moment later with a battered tin can spouting water from half a dozen leaks. Slim opened the hood and gingerly unscrewed the radiator cap. He waited a moment for the steam to stop spouting and then emptied the can into the radiator. "Good. Just fills it." He gave the boy a twenty-centavo piece and was rewarded by a bright smile and a quick "*Gracias.*"

"*Muchacho!*" Diego called.

The boy turned. "*Como?*"

Diego got out of the car and, as he spoke, the boy began to nod his head.

"*Si, si. Esta mañana.*" He bobbed his head up and down again. "*Muy temprano.*"

Diego turned back to Slim. "I asked him if a big sedan passed here today. He says one did—very early this morning."

"Ask him if he knows what time," Slim directed.

The Spanish flew back and forth again, but this time the youngster shook his head negatively.

"He doesn't know what time, Slim, but he says it was just after the sun came up."

Slim looked at his watch. "The sun came up about six, I guess, and now it's nine-thirty. So if it was the Mexican, he's got a three-hour start on us."

"Ask him if another car followed the sedan," Roger suggested.

The boy shook his head at Diego's question.

"He doesn't know. He didn't see any."

They thanked the boy and Slim led the way back to the car. "Of course," he said, "that doesn't mean Smith *isn't* with the Mexican."

"Or behind him," Roger amended.

Slim nodded. "If we're right about the time, the Mexi can must have passed through Hidalgo by now and be in San Luis Potosí—a big city."

"Unless he's waiting for us in Hidalgo," Bill said.

Slim shook his head. "He could be, but I doubt it. If we were in Hidalgo we'd probably be at a hotel, and the chances are he's already checked that."

"What about gas stations?" Diego asked.

"That's the weak part of our plan," Slim said. "He knows we have to get gas sometime, and since there aren't many stations along this road he can easily check every one."

Roger pulled the map out again. "Assuming we had a full tank at Victoria, plus a couple of extra cans, how far could we go before we'd have to get more?" He looked up. "That's probably the way he's figuring, isn't it?"

"I should think so." Slim bent over the map. "What's the mileage from Victoria to Hidalgo?"

Roger computed silently. "As nearly as I can figure it, about two hundred seventy miles—and another thirty to San Luis Potosí."

Slim looked pleased. "That's swell. A full tank is good for approximately three hundred miles, so our Mexican friend must be figuring that we went all the way into Potosí."

"But if he's looking for us there," Bill objected, "it won't take him very long to find out we're not around, or that we didn't stop for gas on the way either."

"He'll find out eventually," Slim conceded. "But checking all the places we could be, and all the gas stations we might have stopped at, isn't an easy job." He grinned at Bill. "We'll fill our stomachs and the gas tank at Hidalgo and push on."

"And walk right into him at Potosí," Diego said.

"If we're careful and go through the city using back streets we have a good chance of giving him the slip there, too. It would take a young army to watch every possible entry and exit of a big city." He reached forward to start the motor. "Anyway it's probably pretty safe for us in Hidalgo now, and from there we'll get in touch with the Consulate in Mexico City."

At eleven o'clock they saw Hidalgo from the crest of a hill, and twenty minutes later they were pulling into a gas station on the outskirts of the town. Slim got out and opened the back of the car to remove the spare gas cans while the attendant pumped gas into the tank.

"How is the road to Guadalajara?" Roger asked.

"Guadalajara? It is good." The attendant's English was heavily accented but easily understandable.

"Why—?" Bill began but Roger interrupted quickly.

"Look, Bill." He pointed inside the gas station building. "Candy. We'd better restock on chocolate."

"What?" Bill saw the look in Roger's eyes. "Oh, sure. Give me some money."

"Here." Slim, treasurer of the group's finances, handed over some coins. "We thought we'd take a look at this part of the country before going south," he continued, speaking to the attendant.

"It is very beautiful, the country. Much mountains." The man closed the gas tank and began to fill the cans.

Bill reappeared then, looking very scared. He motioned to Slim, and, when Slim failed to notice the gesture, moved his arms frantically behind the attendant's back. Slim finally raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Talk to you," Bill said soundlessly, hoping Slim could read his lips.

Slim nodded almost imperceptibly and strolled toward the front of the car. Bill joined him.

"Smith's car!" Bill whispered. "In the courtyard behind the station."

Slim's eyes narrowed. "Go on and get the chocolate. Act as if nothing had happened."

The cans were filled when Slim rejoined the Mexican. Slim helped him lift them into the car and then locked the back. As he paid for the gasoline he said, "I suppose we can get something to eat in San Luis Potosí?"

The attendant nodded. "There are many good hotels, señor. There is a large one on the main street which you must pass." He gave Slim his change and when Bill got back into the car, his hands full of chocolate bars, they drove off in the direction of San Luis Potosí. Four blocks farther on, and out of sight of the gas station, Slim turned to the right and drove down a side street for several blocks before he stopped.

"Now," Roger said, "maybe you'll tell me what all that hocus-pocus was about."

"And you," Diego added, "might explain this Guadalajara business. We're not going there."

"One at a time," Slim said. "You first, Bill. How did you see the car?"

"What car?" Roger asked.

"Smith's car. It was parked in the back yard of the gas station. I saw it when I went in to get the chocolate. There was a little window and I happened to look through it."

Roger gulped. "Whew! That's not so good."

"That's the understatement of the week," Slim commented dryly. "And it's a good thing you brought up

Guadalajara. Maybe that'll throw them off the track again."

Understanding gleamed in Diego's eyes. "Oh. I get it now. And that's why you asked about lunch, huh?"

Slim nodded. "Let them think we're going right through."

Bill spoke up in a small voice. "They're closing in on us."

"Looks that way, doesn't it? Well, that makes it all the more important for us to speak to the Consulate. We have to find a phone someplace." Slim turned to Roger. "I'll need Diego to act as an interpreter. You two stay in the car. You'll be safe here. Yell for help if anything happens."

"They'll be all right, Slim," Diego said. "Look, we're parked right on the town square. And that building down the block seems to be the police headquarters."

"O.K. Let's get going." He took the keys out of the ignition switch and handed them to Roger. "Hang onto these. And don't leave the car alone."

Roger slipped the keys into his pocket and he and Bill slumped down into the seats as the figures of Slim and Diego grew smaller and smaller.

"I wish we were *in* the police station instead of near it," Bill muttered. "In fact, I wish we'd stayed in Colorado camping instead of taking this trip."

"Sure," Roger grunted. "You just keep wishing and everything will be all right. Why don't you wish they'd never picked our car to put the money in?"

"That's good, too."

"In the meantime we're still here in the middle of Mexico with a pile of phony money in the car and a

couple of desperate characters trying to get it away from us."

"I say give it to them. And if we don't want to do that, let's take it into that police station and say we just found it."

"That's fine! And by the time they let us out of jail we'd be too old to go back to school."

"Slim could explain it."

"He knows what he's doing. Just leave him alone."

Bill unwrapped a piece of chocolate. "Well, I just wish he'd do it and get it over with. And besides all that, I'm hungry."

Roger turned to look at him disgustedly, but the chocolate did look good and it was a long time since they'd had a full meal. He began to unwrap a bar. "Keep your eyes open for the Mexican's car. That's keep your mind off of food."

"He's probably in the next town looking for us there, while his partner waited for us here. Anyway, I don't see any big black sedans around." He sat up straighter on the seat and looked out of the window. "In fact I don't see any automobiles at all except that beaten up old truck over there."

Roger pointed across the square. "There's half a dozen parked busses."

"I bet they don't need traffic cops in this town, just the same."

Roger didn't answer. He had suddenly bent forward to peer through the windshield at the police headquarters. A car had pulled up in front of the building—a big black sedan. Even at this distance he couldn't mistake the figure that got out of it and entered the building.

"See that?" Roger asked, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Bill swallowed the last bite of his chocolate with difficulty. "Yeah."

Roger slipped the key into the switch. "If he comes out and keeps going the way his car's headed, he'll pass us. We'd better get off this street—and fast."

He backed the car up about fifty feet and pulled into a side street. Half a block away from the square he stopped.

"Slim'll never find us here," Bill pointed out.

"One of us will have to go back to the corner and watch for him." Roger turned around to face his brother. "You or me?"

"I'll go." Bill got out of the car. "I'll stand at the corner where you can see me. If I wave to you that means the Mexican is coming our way and you'd better get going."

Roger kept his hand on the key, ready to start at a moment's notice, and his eyes on the small figure of Bill in the rearview mirror. Every nerve in his body was as tense as a stretched rubber band.

Bill was lounging at the corner, peeking around several times a minute to watch the big sedan and to see if Slim and Diego were approaching. Seconds went by slowly. Minutes went by. There was no signal from Bill, no sign of Slim.

Roger squirmed to ease the strained muscles in his neck, and his eyes moved from the mirror for a moment. When he looked up again Bill was gone, but he reappeared an instant later, running toward the car.

Roger flipped the switch and started the motor.

"Slim's coming," Bill panted, climbing into the back seat. "I waved to him and came on down."

A moment later Slim and Diego hurried up.

"What's the idea of moving down here?" Slim asked, as Roger moved over to let him slide beneath the wheel.

"The Mexican," Roger explained. "We saw him going into the police station and we were afraid he'd see us parked out on the square."

Slim's mouth tightened. "So that *was* his car. I only saw it from a distance. Well that," he said quietly, "really does it."

"Why? What's the matter? Couldn't you get to speak to anybody at the Consulate?"

Slim shook his head. "I couldn't even get a call through. There's only one line down to Mexico City and the aged gentleman who acts as the telephone operator spent twenty minutes finding out that it would take three or four hours before it was my turn on the line." He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "So, I thought we'd take a chance and go to the local police even if—But now . . ." his voice tapered off.

"But look, Slim," Diego broke in, "if that Mexican went to the police station, mightn't it mean that he's a policeman, too? Why else would he go there?"

Slim shrugged. "There could be several explanations for that, but I doubt that any of them are based on his being an officer. If he's a detective looking for the counterfeit money, why didn't he arrest us long before this?"

"Maybe he wasn't sure," Roger said. "He wouldn't want to bother tourists unless he knew definitely that we had the money."

Slim shook his head negatively. "That won't work. He was at the border when we cleared it. If he suspected us he could have gotten the customs men to give the car a good going over. But he didn't."

"But, Slim," Bill said, "if he's not a policeman—if he's

one of the gang—what would he be doing at the police station? He'd want to stay away from it, wouldn't he?"

"Not if the police—or certain members of the police—were his friends," Slim said slowly. "And if they're his friends, they're no friends of ours. Suppose he and Smith are in this together. Suppose, further, that he's already made sure we didn't get as far as San Luis Potosí. And now Smith undoubtedly knows we were here a little while ago. See how nicely that narrows down the search?"

"But why the police in that case?" Roger asked. "If they've got us trapped—"

"The police could simplify matters for them. They can pick us up and question us—say they want to examine our tourist visas or our car permit, or something. Then, while we're inside, the money is taken out of the car. Easy."

There was silence for a long minute—a silence that was broken by the slap-slap of a pair of sandals on the feet of an old Mexican who shuffled by. He looked at them curiously as he passed.

"We can't stay here long, that's a cinch," Slim said. "We're too much of a curiosity."

Diego leaned forward. "What about my relatives? If we can find them we could hide there as long as we wanted."

"I've been thinking of that," Slim admitted. "But not too happily."

"Why not?"

"In the first place, as I said before, I don't want to bring any trouble to innocent people."

"When my father and I were in trouble back in Colorado, you were an innocent bystander." Diego spoke in a quiet voice that permitted no interruption. "But that

didn't keep you and Roger and Bill and his father from helping us. I have never seen my relatives here, but I know they'd like to have an opportunity to repay you."

Slim turned around to grin at Diego. "Stated that way, I can't find an answer. But suppose we did hide? We might have to stay hidden for days before our friends gave up looking for us. Or they might find us and . . ."

Roger spoke up. "Maybe I have the answer to that. If we can hide for a couple of days, we could take a chance then and sneak into the nearest town and try to call Mexico City again. Or maybe we could send a telegram."

"Sure, Slim." Diego carried on eagerly. "I could change my clothes and send a telegram without either you or Roger or Bill coming into town at all. And I could come in the next day to see if there was an answer. In Mexican clothes no one would know me."

Slim looked thoughtful. "We still haven't found your relatives yet," he reminded them.

"That's what I'll do right now." Diego got out of the car. "I know they live in a village called La Gloria. And I know it's supposed to be about ten miles from Hidalgo, because my father told me they used to come here on market days." He hesitated. "Well, Slim?"

Slim thought another moment. Then he nodded. "I guess it's the best thing we can do. If they want to play hide-and-seek—we'll play with them. Go ahead, Diego. Find out where La Gloria is."



CHAPTER SIX

"WAIT A MINUTE," Roger spoke up suddenly. "You can't go roaming around here, Diego. You're too likely to run into either the Mexican or Smith."

"But I have to go," Diego said. "I'm the only one who can find out where La Gloria is."

"But you look too much like a tourist. You stand out like a sore thumb."

"That's easy," Bill suggested. "Disguise yourself."

"Slim doesn't carry a box of disguises around," Roger replied disgustedly.

Diego's eyes lit up. "But there are plenty of disguises here." He stuck his head inside the car. "Give me some money, Slim. I'll get one."

Slim gave him several pesos and a handful of coins. "Take it easy."

"I will." Diego walked toward the square and a moment later he had disappeared.

More people were passing now, all of them openly curious. Several times the car was approached by men selling sandals and fruit, and once a young boy came up to ask them to buy chewing gum.

"I feel like we were in a cage at a zoo," Bill said nervously. "Here comes another one, selling baskets this time."

"Maybe we ought to buy some," Roger suggested. "Mom would like them."

"We'll have plenty of time for buying things after we get out of this mess," Slim said shortly. "No, thanks," he added, as the boy approached the car.

Roger looked at the cheap cotton trousers and loose shirt that the boy was wearing. Then he glanced down at the battered homemade sandals. "Maybe we ought to buy something," he murmured.

The brown hands held forth a colorful basket. "Like? meester?" A big sombrero shielded the face from view, but there was something familiar about the voice. Roger leaned forward to peer underneath the hat. "Diego!"

"What?" Slim slid across the seat. "Where did you get those clothes?"

Diego grinned. "Bought them. Here are my own." He emptied one of the baskets he held. "Cost me eight pesos."

"And worth it," Slim said. "Nobody would recognize you in that getup."

"O.K. Now I'll start snooping. I wanted to get rid of that stuff first. The Mexican's car's still at the police station. He must be having quite a conference in there."

"Stay away from him," Slim said. "Just find out where your uncles live and if we can get there."

Diego nodded. "I'll go down to the market where the people from the countryside come in. Someone there should know." He tipped the hat forward over his face again and shuffled off toward the square.

He had to go past the police station, and although he felt secure in his disguise, he crossed to the other side of the street as an extra precaution. A moment later he was thankful he had been so careful, for just as he was directly across the street from the police headquarters, one of the massive doors opened and the Mexican came out. He got into his car and sat there for a moment, idly swinging his key chain. Then he started the motor and the car moved slowly off.

Diego hesitated a moment, remembering Slim's instructions, and then he decided to take a chance. It might be worth it. He started off after the car. By cutting across the square diagonally, he reached the far side a moment after the big sedan had passed the corner. Diego walked down the street, keeping his eye on the slowly moving vehicle ahead. Suddenly it turned left, and when Diego reached that corner he found himself back at the highway they had come in on.

Two blocks to his left was the gas station at which they had stopped, and parked in front of it was the big sedan.

Diego walked slowly toward it. It was difficult keeping his pace and expression easy and careless, while inside his heart was pounding. But he did his best to look exactly like the other boys who wandered around the town selling the products they or their families had grown or made.

There was no one in the car when he reached it, so Diego turned to walk down a little alley alongside the building toward the adobe wall enclosing the patio in which Bill had seen Smith's car. About twenty feet from the front of the building, the high wall was broken by a barred door through which Diego heard the murmur of voices. He stopped just beyond, sat down on the ground and leaned back against the warm wall. He hoped he looked as if he were taking a siesta, instead of listening intently.

The station attendant was speaking in quick excited Spanish. "They asked about the road to Guadalajara and if there were restaurants in San Luis Potosí."

"Guadalajara?" the Mexican asked. "Are you sure?"

"Certainly. I, too, questioned it after what you had told me."

Diego heard the sound of a match being scraped. "Perhaps I was mistaken," the Mexican said. "Maybe they do not suspect after all. Americans—who can tell about them? It would not surprise me if they had suddenly decided to drive all night because they like it, and if they had changed the plan of their trip for nothing but a whim."

"Bah! That cannot be." The attendant sounded positive. "Did they not take great pains to deceive your guard at the junction?"

"True. And of course there is the matter of my tire which did not have a puncture, but which did, nevertheless, leak."

"I tell you they have found the money. What they want to do with it I do not know—but I am sure that they know we are following them."

"And what of him—Smith?"



*Nothing more than narrow streets covered over
with white awnings.*

"I told him what I have told you. He spoke with someone on his radio—to whom I do not know. Then he left to try to pick up their trail again."

"He is a fool! If he had done his job well, all this would not be necessary."

"Perhaps it is that the others are too smart for him. He could not help it, that they discovered the money."

"It is too late to worry about that now. We must find them, and Smith must get the money. The highway at the other end of the city is being watched, but I had better get back to the police and ask them to start a search of the city itself."

Diego got to his feet quickly and trotted to the end of the alley where he turned out of sight of the gas station. His mind was seething with what he had heard and it took a determined effort not to return to the car immediately to tell Slim about it. But he had still another thing to do—and it seemed all the more important now, in the light of what he had learned.

He hurried back to the square and past it to the market, which was nothing more than three or four narrow streets covered over with white awnings. Under their pale shade all kinds of merchandise, from bolts of cloth to piles of beans, were displayed. Many of the sellers didn't have even a table on which to spread their wares, but merely laid a cloth over the hard-baked earth and used as a counter. At one corner a man and his wife had fifteen or twenty chickens tied together by their legs. Another had brought a large array of shining tin cans that had once held salad oil, and which he was selling as water containers.

An old woman stopped Diego suddenly and fingered one of his three baskets.

"Fifty centavos," she offered.

Diego gulped. He had no idea what the price should be, but he knew that bargaining was an established custom. "One peso," he replied, wishing he could hurry on, but afraid to seem so out of character.

The old woman raised horrified eyes upward. "One peso! Ridiculous!" She looked at the baskets again, even more carefully than before. "Sixty centavos."

"Ninety."

"Sixty-five. Not one more."

"Eighty." Diego sounded just as determined.

"Seventy," said the old woman.

"Good." With a sigh of relief, Diego gave her a basket and got seventy centavos in exchange.

As the old woman plodded off, grinning delightedly at her success, Diego walked on until he reached a small table full of little baskets of rice. The man behind the table waited.

"Do you know where La Gloria is?" Diego asked.

The man seemed disappointed at the question, but he answered courteously. "It is off to the north."

"Far?" Diego asked.

The man considered. "You are walking?"

"Perhaps. Is there a road?"

"There is a road, yes. But if you are walking you do not need to follow the road. It is shorter if you take the path through the hills. Only ten kilometers, perhaps. By the road—perhaps fifteen."

"Where is the road?" Diego asked.

"Why do you need a road if you are walking?"

Diego thought quickly. "Because I may be lucky enough to get a ride in a wagon."

The Mexican shrugged. "Not many wagons go in that direction."

"Do automobiles go there?"

The man laughed. "Automobiles? Perhaps three times a year. The doctors and the nurses visit there to make vaccinations."

"But where is the road?" Diego persisted.

With many gestures, and the aid of a crude map scratched into the hard earth, the old man explained. Diego thanked him, and was about to turn away when he thought of something. So he turned back to the rice-seller and rapidly concluded a bargain. Then he made one more stop—at the corner where the chickens were being sold.

Three anxious people awaited him at the car, but their anxiety turned into amazement at the sight of Diego burdened with four squawking birds and a bulging package.

"What goes on here?" Slim asked.

"Did you have to buy all that to get some information?" Roger wanted to know.

"Wait a minute." Diego put the chickens on the floor in the back and got into the car still clutching the rice. "I bought this to take along in case there isn't enough food at my uncles' for all of us—for Bill especially."

"Oh." Slim smiled. "Thoughtful and smart. How do we get there—and can we get there in a car?"

Diego nodded. "There's some sort of a road that visiting nurses and doctors use a couple of times a year." He looked directly at Slim. "We've got to try it. We can't stay here."

"What did you find out?"

"Maybe we'd better find the road first," Diego suggested. "The police are probably looking for us now."

Slim started the motor immediately. "Which way?"

"Straight ahead to the end of this street." Diego was visualizing the map that had been drawn in the earth. "Turn left when you get there and go three blocks."

Following Diego's instructions, Slim deftly guided the car through the narrow streets of Hidalgo. After a series of complicated turns and twists, they came to what appeared to be the end of the town. Here the street stopped but a pair of tracks in the earth took its place.

"This must be the road," Diego said.

Slim looked at it as it wandered across the fields.

"Well, it doesn't look like much, but let's go. And now start talking, Diego. I couldn't listen to you in those crowded streets."

Diego took a long breath and began, as the car jounced on. He told everything that had happened to him, and when he finished and sat back there wasn't a sound to break the silence of the empty countryside, except the roar of the car's motor.

Slim spoke finally. "You did what you shouldn't have done, Diego." He grinned over his shoulder. "But I can't say I'm sorry. It looks as if some of the loose pieces of this puzzle are beginning to fit together."

"You mean the Mexican and Smith *are* in this together?" Roger asked.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Well, anyway," Bill said, "we sort of suspected that. So it isn't exactly anything new to worry about."

"That doesn't particularly worry me," Slim said. "What is bothering me is the size of the organization we're fighting. Remember, Diego said that Smith used a radio.

That means a headquarters someplace. If they're big enough to have men planted all along the roads, have a communications setup, and be able to buy off police departments—they're too big to handle alone. We need help—and we're in no position to get it."

"I thought we were going to get a telegram through tomorrow," Bill said. "That was part of the reason for coming out here, wasn't it?"

"If they've got the police department working for them," Roger asked, "how long will it take them to find out we sent a telegram?"

"Oh." Bill subsided. "So what are we going to do?"

"We have to reach my uncles' place," Diego said firmly.

Slim nodded. "Road or no road, I think it's our only chance now. If we can stay hidden there for a little while, they may conclude that we got away somehow, relax their guard, and then we can make a break for it. Does this road take us all the way out?"

"No," Diego told him. "We go out here to the next small village and take the left fork into the hills."

A moment later the road turned across a planted field.

"I hope we don't get shot for trespassing," Slim grunted, as he guided the car along the faintly marked lane.

"What is this stuff that's growing around here anyway?" Bill wondered.

"I think maybe it's sugar," Diego said. "Anyway, it looks like pictures of sugar cane I've seen."

"Uh-uh. What's this?" Slim stopped before a narrow wooden bridge across what seemed to be an irrigation ditch. The bridge was arched so sharply that it looked as if the car would get hung on the ridge as it crossed. They got out to inspect it.

"I don't think so," Slim said, shaking his head.

"If we all got out the car would ride a little higher," Roger suggested.

"You kids watch as I cross. If you see the undercarriage scraping, yell. This is no time to have a breakdown."

Slim moved the car forward slowly and the front wheels mounted the steep incline and then dropped over the ridge to descend. The boys lay on their stomachs to peer beneath.

"How is it?" Slim asked, stopping.

"Got about two inches between the ridge and the chassis," Roger replied.

"Watch it now," Slim edged on again.

"One inch," Roger called.

The car moved another half a foot. "Well?"

"You'll make it," Diego said.

"Good." Slim let the clutch out slowly and the car inched ahead. A moment later it was over, and the boys scrambled in again.

"I hope we don't have many more of those," Slim said.

For another five miles the lane cut through the fields, and behind them the dust rose in a thick cloud. They seemed to be traveling in a great wide plateau fenced in on all sides by rocky, ragged mountains. They crossed three more irrigation ditches before they came to the village Diego had spoken of.

"Not much of a town," Bill said.

"The less the better," Slim said. "I wouldn't care if there wasn't a soul between here and Diego's uncles' place."

"Doesn't seem to be anybody here anyway," Roger said. "It looks deserted."

"Maybe everybody's out in the fields," Diego suggested.

The dozen huts were made of vertical stakes like bamboo, and covered by thatched roofs. They looked temporary and fragile. A dog ran out and barked, and an old woman left one of the huts to peer at them, but there was no other sign of life.

"Here's the fork." Diego pointed ahead to where a pair of tracks branched off to the left and seemed to lead directly to the hills that loomed up blue and massive in the distance.

Slim took advantage of a stretch of smooth ground beyond the fork to get the car up to twenty miles an hour, and the dust column behind them seemed to double its size. About three miles beyond the village, at the top of a slight rise, the road seemed to disappear into the air.

"I guess this is the end of the line," he said. "Let's get out."

They walked forward about ten feet and looked.

"Whew!" Bill whistled.

About thirty feet below them a wide brook glistened and gurgled. The road dipped over the edge of the ravine with no effort at grading—it just went straight down and into the water. And on the other side, it just climbed straight up and over the edge.

"We'd need a tractor to make this," Diego said.

Slim studied the descent carefully. "We could go down, all right, and we could even go up on the other side if we had a start. But we can't get a start in the brook."

"And anyway," Roger said, "can we ford the brook?"

Diego pulled off his sandals. "I'll see." He slithered down the steep incline and walked out into the water. "It's only a couple of inches deep, and the bottom is hard

gravel." He walked all the way across and then came back.

"If we get stuck," Slim said, "we're really in a mess."

"I could always walk back to the village and get some men out here with oxen," Diego said.

"That would mean a lot of publicity we don't want. But let's try it."

They held their breaths as the car tipped over the edge and began to slide down toward the water. Slim kept it in low and applied the brakes to keep the speed down to a snail's pace. Then there was a splash and they were in the brook.

Slowly, the car edged forward, and the hard creek bottom held firmly. When the front wheels struck the opposite shore, Slim stopped, reversed the car, and moved back about ten feet. Then he put it in low speed and urged it forward again. There was a lurch as the front wheels struck the bank. Slim opened the throttle a bit and the rear wheels churned up the gravel in an effort to take hold. But somehow the car kept moving ahead, and with a final jounce, the rear wheels left the brook and climbed up on land. Then slowly, fighting every inch of the way, it crawled up the grade.

Not until they were over the top did any of them take a good breath. Slim slumped back against the seat. "Another five feet of climbing and we'd never have made it."

"We shouldn't be far away now," Roger said. "I've been checking the speedometer, and we've come more than fifteen kilometers."

The road became a niche cut in the side of the hills, always pointing upward, but now quite easily driven over. Behind them they could see the ravine they had

crossed, but it was already several hundred feet below them.

"We must be a thousand feet higher than Hidalgo," Bill muttered. "Quiet," he added, as the chickens unexpectedly set up a tremendous squawking.

"Look," Diego was pointing ahead to a gentle valley. "There's a village."

It looked even smaller than the one they had passed recently, and the huts in the distance looked like little mounds of earth or anthills. The car nosed down slightly and the village disappeared from view as they lost their vantage point on the hilltop.

"We must be pretty near it now." Slim pulled the car to a halt. "I'd rather not drive through it making inquiries. Suppose you walk ahead, Diego, and see if this is the right place. Then maybe we can get to your uncle's house without being too obvious."

They watched his white-clad figure grow smaller and smaller as he trotted away. A bend in the road hid him from view when he was almost half a mile down the road. They sat back to wait.

It was quiet there, and peaceful. There were trees that shaded the road from the reddish rays of the setting sun, and it seemed as if nothing could possibly threaten them. But not fifteen miles behind them was Hidalgo, where two desperate men and a police force were looking for them. Would they be discovered in this out-of-the-way spot? And if not, would they be able to return to the highway in a few days and continue to Mexico City unmolested?

As if in answer to their thoughts, Slim unlocked the glove compartment and took out his automatic. He looked at it briefly to make sure everything was in order

and then he stuck it under his shirt where his belt would keep it tight against him.

"Nothing like making sure," he grinned. "Not that I think we'll need it here."

Bill, in the back seat, began to doze. Slim looked at his watch and muttered, "Forty-five minutes."

"It'll take him almost that long to walk there and back," Roger said. "And he'll need at least fifteen minutes to explain who he is and what we want."

"There's dust coming up ahead," Bill said.

"Must be Diego. But why the dust? He made hardly any before."

"A burro!" Bill had come fully awake. "And it looks as if there were two people on it."

They could recognize Diego now, seated on the burro behind a boy of about his own age. Soon they clattered up, and Diego slid off the small animal's back. His fellow rider dismounted with more dignity.

"I found them!" Diego shouted. "They live just this side of the village. This is my cousin, Carlos Montez." He turned and rattled off a sentence in Spanish. The boy approached and offered his hand to Slim and then to Roger and Bill.

"Everything's fixed," Diego said. "We can stay as long as we like—the longer the better, my uncle said."

"Good. Can Carlos ride back with us and lead the burro, or does he have to ride it back home?"

Diego said something to Carlos who grinned widely, shook his head, and then got back on the burro.

"No, Carlos!" Diego exclaimed.

That much Slim and the boys could understand, but the machine-gun volley of Spanish that followed left them completely bewildered, more so as the expression

on Carlos' face changed to one of amazement and then doubt.

He shook his head again and then said something additional, at which Diego once more said "No!" emphatically.

"What's up, Diego?"

"His father—my uncle—told him to go to the village we just passed through and invite some friends for supper tonight to celebrate our arrival."

"Uh-uh." Slim shook his head. "That's just what we want to avoid."

"That's what I told him—that we don't want anybody to know we're here, but he says his father told him to go." Diego turned back to Carlos and began to speak rapidly again. Carlos finally shrugged his shoulders and dismounted. He got into the car, holding onto the animal's halter.

"O.K., Slim," Diego said. "He'll come back with us, but he can't understand it."

"I'll bet he can't," Slim answered. "And it's going to be even more difficult to explain things to your uncle without giving the whole thing away—and without appearing discourteous."

"Even if we have to tell them the entire story," Diego said, "I know it won't matter."

"Probably not as far as their feelings for us are concerned," Slim agreed. "But for their own sake I'd like them to know nothing about it whatsoever. They can't be blamed for anything then." He glanced at the burro trotting patiently alongside.

"Anyway," he grinned, "the burro doesn't seem to be worried."



CHAPTER SEVEN

"Look!" Roger pointed ahead to the cluster of huts they could now see quite clearly. "Look at all those people! They must have sent somebody else to get all their friends from La Gloria."

"I don't think so." Diego leaned forward and spoke to Carlos who shook his head negatively. "Carlos says nobody was sent to La Gloria. Those are just my relatives."

"All of them?" Bill asked. He grinned. "And you thought four extra people for dinner would be a problem!"

"Looks like an army drawn up for review," Slim muttered. "Our arrival will be all over the countryside by tomorrow."

"Don't worry, Slim. No one will say a word if my uncle says not to."

Slim pulled the car up in front of the line of men, women and children. "Now what?"

"Now I'll introduce you," Diego answered, crawling out of the car. But before he could start, one of the waiting Mexicans—the oldest—had begun to speak to Carlos in a manner that left no doubt as to his displeasure. Carlos said something in return and then turned to Diego, who began to chatter and gesticulate.

Although the words that were flying around meant nothing to Slim and the boys, they had no difficulty in following the conversation. Obviously, Diego's uncle was scolding Carlos for not carrying out his orders, while Diego was trying to make the man understand that, for some reason, it was essential that nobody should know of their arrival. The conversation stopped after several minutes when Diego's uncle nodded and then, indicating Slim, said something else to Diego.

Diego turned to face them, smiling. "My uncle apologizes for this family argument before guests. He now understands why Carlos did not go to the village, and he says it will be as we request—no one will know that we are here." He motioned them forward. "Now I'll introduce you." He said something to his relatives and Slim and the boys heard their names translated into Spanish. Slim became *Sleem*, Roger became something that sounded to his untrained ear like *Roherio*, and Bill's name appeared to be *Gee-airmo*. Then Diego led Slim and the boys over to the end of the line where five men were standing.

"My uncles," he said. "Tío Ramon, Tío Pedro, Tío Manuel, Tío Arturo, and Tío José."

The five men shook hands with Slim and then with Roger and Bill.

Diego moved down the line. "My aunts. Tía Rosa, Tía Maria, Tía Celita, Tía Dolores and Tía Gloria." The handshaking procedure was again solemnly carried out.

"And these," Diego went on, indicating about twenty children ranging in size from Carlos to several who couldn't have been more than a year old, "are my cousins." He grinned. "There are too many to introduce separately. You will have to get to know them by yourselves. And so will I. I can't tell them apart yet." He said something to the youngsters in Spanish, at which they all grinned and nodded their heads.

Tío Ramon, evidently the oldest of the uncles, spoke to his family and the women and children smiled again and moved off.

"We're going to have a feast tonight," Diego explained. "They're going to get it ready. Now, Slim. What do you want done?"

"Let me catch my breath," Slim smiled. "I'm a little overwhelmed by all this welcome. Anyway, there isn't anything that has to be done except to get the car in a place where it will be hidden from view, and where we can pitch our tents near by."

Diego shook his head. "That tent part is going to take a little more explaining. They may be insulted if we don't stay in their houses." Diego turned and spoke to his uncles.

They shook their heads and all talked at once. Diego went on speaking for a long time and finally they nodded reluctantly.

"They don't like it," Diego said to Slim, "but they agree."

"That's swell," Slim sounded relieved. "I hope they realize that we'd like nothing better than to take advantage of their hospitality, but under the circumstances we'd better not."

Tío Ramon said something to Diego, who replied briefly and then turned to Slim.

"My uncle says that it makes no difference to them why we came here. He is glad that we did. He also said that no one will learn that we are here, but that if anyone tries to molest us, it will be a great honor to the Montez family if we will allow them to help us."

Slim ran his hand across his chin in a preoccupied manner. "That's the part I don't like. If I tell them what's been going on they'll become too deeply involved. On the other hand, they have a perfect right to know what they may be letting themselves in for. Especially if the police come snooping around."

Diego thought a moment. "Could I tell them that we have something in the car that must be delivered to the American Ambassador in Mexico City, and that some men are trying to stop us?"

Slim nodded. "But that wouldn't prepare them for a visit from the police if it should ever come to that. After all, the police may go so far as to accuse your family of harboring criminals—and that's a serious offense."

"Why can't I tell them that the men have apparently bought off the police, so that the police are dangerous to us, too?"

Slim shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "Look, Diego. My only worry is for your family. I don't want them to get hurt in any way. But you understand them better than I do, and if you think it's all right to tell them that, go ahead."

"I think I will." Diego turned to his uncles who had been waiting patiently and spoke to them for several minutes. Tío Ramon interrupted several times, and once Tío Arturo said something. When Diego finished they all smiled, and Tío Ramon made a speech that lasted quite a long time.

Diego was grinning when he turned to translate. "They are very happy about the police. They say that when my father and I were arrested and put in jail, you fought against the police to get us out. Now they can repay that debt."

"That wasn't exactly the same thing," Slim answered.

"It is to them," Diego said. "So since that's settled, should we get the car out of the way and get the tents up while there's still some light?"

"What about the chickens and the rice?" Bill asked.

"I forgot about them." Diego went to the car and hauled out the protesting birds and the bag of rice, while Tío Ramon called for one of his sons to come and get them.

"Now we can get started." Diego pointed toward a row of four huts that lined the road on the south side. "These houses belong to Tío Ramon and Tío Pedro. These others," he pointed to the houses on the north side of the road, "belong to my other uncles. The smaller buildings are used to store things."

Slim looked them over carefully. "Those on the south side are below the road level, and if we parked there we could easily be seen—not only from the road but possibly from the valley below. But if we get behind the houses on the north side, where the land is higher than the road, we'd be better hidden."

Diego nodded. "That's what Tío Ramon thought.

There's a thick clump of cactus there and if we put the car inside it no one will find it. And we can put the tents right next to the car so we can keep an eye on it."

Slim got into the car and maneuvered it between the huts on the north side of the road until he was behind them, and almost twenty-five feet higher than the road itself. He turned sharply and headed toward a thick growth of spiny cactus, but when he got close he found there was no way of getting inside the clump.

Ramon and Arturo came up then, armed with machetes, long wicked-looking knives that they wielded like axes. In a few minutes they had cut a narrow path into the growth, and then they hacked out a rectangular space inside, large enough to contain the car and the two tents. Slim walked down to the road and looked back.

"O.K. You can't see a thing from here."

He ran the car into its hiding place and shut off the motor. "Now the tents."

Tío Ramon and Tío Arturo, now joined by several of Diego's cousins, made short work of smoothing out the ground. The protruding cactus stumps were cut away neatly and a deep layer of straw was put down to form a soft floor for the shelters. In fifteen minutes the tents were up and securely staked to the hard ground. Bill and Roger blew up the pneumatic mattresses and laid them inside the tents.

The mattresses were a source of great amusement to Diego's Mexican relatives. They prodded them, sat on them, tried bouncing around on them and finally stretched out and pretended to be asleep.

"They can't understand them," Diego grinned. "They sleep on straw mats on the ground. They're not accustomed to anything as soft as this."

Bill sniffed. "What's that I smell? Could it be chicken?"

"Chicken," Diego said, "and rice and *tortillas* and more besides. And I want to warn you again—there'll be a hot sauce, so go easy."

"Don't worry," Bill grinned. "I learned my lesson."

Diego said something to his uncles who laughed and pointed to Bill.

Bill flushed. "What did you tell them?"

"Just how much you like to eat—especially *salsa picante*."

Bill looked relieved. "Oh. If that's all, I don't care."

"I don't suppose they have showers here, but I sure would like to get cleaned up," Roger said to Diego.

Diego asked his uncle, who pointed across the road while he spoke.

"There are no showers but there is a good brook down the hill across the road. We can all take a dip. How about it, Slim?"

"Sounds good to me. Get some soap out of the bag and take the towels along."

Diego's uncles had some work to do and left them as they crossed the road and walked downhill toward the brook.

"What's that?" Bill asked, pausing.

They heard a rhythmic clapping of hands.

Diego grinned. "You ought to remember what that means. You ate enough of them at my house."

"They're making *tortillas*!" Bill exclaimed. "Let's hurry up with this bathing. I'm getting hungry."

There was a low dam across the brook, backing the water up into an irrigation ditch leading off across the sloping fields. And at the dam there was about three feet of cold sparkling water in which they bathed and even

swam a little. It was almost dark by then, and the only lights visible were those up at the huts where the final preparations for the meal were being made.

They dried themselves, got dressed and made their way up to the tents. The cactus clump seemed like a fortress hemming them in and hiding them from intruders.

The tents had been pitched end to end so that they appeared to be one long tent rather than two. Bill dropped onto his mattress and sighed gently. Slim, in the other tent, had lit a small kerosene lamp and by its light he was hanging his towel to dry and putting away his soap container.

"Peaceful here, isn't it?" he said.

Roger was combing his hair in front of a small metal mirror that was propped up on Slim's bag. "Yeah. It's peaceful all right, but we can't stay here forever. What comes next?"

"Stop worrying," Bill advised. "We're going to get a swell meal in a couple of minutes, and then we're going to get a good night's sleep—the first since we left Laredo about ten years ago."

"Only two nights ago," Diego corrected. He sat cross legged on Roger's mattress. "I just thought of something."

"Good or bad?" Slim grinned.

Diego shrugged. "Who knows? What I think we should do is go back into Hidalgo tomorrow and see what's happening."

They looked at him in surprise. "I don't mean all of us," he continued. "Just me and Carlos. We could take a couple of burros and be there in about an hour and a half if we cut across the hills. We could wander all over town, check the gas station, and the police headquarters, and get back here in no time."

"Let's talk about it later," Slim said. "I hear someone coming."

It was Carlos, to call them for supper, and with no urging they followed him back to the other side of the road where a long table had been set up in Tío Ramon's low-ceilinged house.

A dozen earthenware bowls were steaming, and the pungent smell of highly seasoned chicken and rice met them in waves as they entered the door. Plates of *tortillas* and pots of beans added to the color and, to complete the picture, two of Diego's cousins were softly strumming guitars.

A great shout of laughter rose as Slim and the boys came into the circle of light thrown by several lanterns, and the look of amazement could be seen on their faces. But when Tío Ramon stepped forward everyone quieted down. He spoke solemnly and with great dignity. Slim and the boys listened intently although they couldn't understand, because there was something compelling in the way the man spoke. When he finished, Diego began to translate rapidly.

"He said that although you and he do not speak the same language, he knows you will understand what he means because both of you speak the language of friendship. He says that you and Roger and Bill are more than friends because of what you did for his brother. Therefore he offers you, in the name of the entire family, all that they have."

"Whew!" Roger whispered. "When you make friends down here you really make them, don't you?"

Slim cleared his throat. "Tell him, Diego, that we deeply appreciate this magnificent display of hospitality, and that. . . ." He stopped. "There doesn't seem to be

words enough for what I want to say, Diego. You'll have to do it for us."

Diego grinned and started to speak, and certainly *he* wasn't at a loss for words. He went on and on until Bill was afraid they'd never get a chance to try the food. But finally he finished and then Tío Ramon seated them and took his own place at the head of the table.

Exactly what they did eat, Bill was never sure, because there seemed to be an endless series of servings. As soon as they finished one type of food, one of Diego's aunts or cousins was there immediately with another. There was a salad made up of a bewildering mixture of avocado, onion, small green peppers and other spices all mashed to a paste and served on lettuce leaves.

"It's called *guacamole*," Diego whispered to Bill, "and it's hot."

Bill, who had recovered from a temporary confusion at the lack of spoons or forks, was using the flat *tortillas* instead, as his hosts did. He had picked up a sizable scoop of the *guacamole* just as Diego spoke, but immediately he checked himself and shook most of the paste off the tortilla before putting it into his mouth. He grinned at Diego, after the first swallow. "Yeah, it's hot, all right, but I can handle it. I must be getting tough."

"Those look just like the things your mother gave us in Colorado," Roger said suddenly, as a new dish arrived.

"*Enchiladas*. They'll be a little warm, too," Diego cautioned.

When they finally got to the chicken and rice and the beans, even Bill's appetite had been a little blunted. And an hour later when bowls of bananas, mangoes and papayas were placed before them, none of them thought

they could eat another thing. But a large pot of coffee was set on the table and beside it a pitcher of hot milk. Mixed half and half, they made a delicious drink after so heavy a meal, and restored the boys a little. The guitars were taken up again then, and everybody seemed to settle down as if to spend the rest of the night at the table, although some of the younger children had already fallen asleep and been taken away by their mothers or older sisters.

Diego, his eyes sparkling, kept busy acting as an interpreter between his friends and his relatives. There were all sorts of questions, the Mexicans discovered, that had to be answered. What kind of a farm did they have? Did the children go to school?

Diego began to get a stiff neck from turning back and forth so much.

"They grow everything we ate tonight," he told Slim. "The chickens, the beans, and the rice. The fruit grows by itself around here. They also grow sugar cane and maguey—a kind of cactus."

"Why grow cactus?" Roger asked. "You can't use it for anything, can you?"

Diego laughed. "You could almost live on the maguey plant alone. You can make paper and molasses from its pulp, and cord and rope from the fibers. The long spiny leaves make good shingles. Some of the houses here are covered with them. And they can even make beer and whisky out of the sap of the plant."

"Wow! Maybe we should plant a few at home," Bill murmured.

"I thought you had to grow rice in swamps," Slim spoke up. "Where do you get swamps this far up? We must be almost a mile above sea level."

"I'll find out." Diego asked several questions and received a lengthy answer. "That brook we bathed in," he said finally, "irrigates the rice fields. It's mountain fed and runs all the time, except maybe for a couple of weeks at the end of the dry season. My uncle says that they take the rice to a mill in La Gloria for threshing. They sell part of it and keep the rest for themselves."

"Do they grow their own corn?" Roger asked, remembering the tortillas which he knew were made of corn flour.

Diego nodded. "The corn grows up above the tents, where there's plenty of good hot sun. The sugar is down below with the rice. They have a system for shutting off the irrigation in one field and flooding another, so they can change the crops from sugar to rice whenever the soil needs it."

"Do they own all this land?"

Diego asked his uncle. "They do, now," he reported. "But until they had the revolution about thirty years ago they were all peons working for a big landowner. After the revolution the government divided the land up and they each got their own."

"I didn't see any machinery around here," Bill said. "Don't they have tractors?"

"They use oxen for the heavy work," Diego replied. "Some of the big co-operative farms have tractors, but they're pretty expensive and the smaller farmers get along without them."

"What about schools?" Roger asked. "I remember we passed several big ones along the highway, but I haven't seen any since we left the main road."

"That's because we've been doing so much of our traveling after dark," Bill grinned. "That's what I al-

ways say: If you want to see a new country, travel at night."

"We're learning plenty right now," Roger retorted. "We'd never get to see how a Mexican farmer lives, if it weren't for those counterfeiters."

"Sure. I suppose we ought to send them a letter of thanks." Bill yawned. "What time is it?"

"Ten-thirty," Roger answered. "And stay awake long enough for me to find out about the schools. Maybe I'll write a theme about it for English class when we get home."

Diego had been talking to Carlos. Now he turned to Roger. "Carlos says there is a new school in La Gloria. That's where he goes. It's about a mile from here so it's not too far to walk."

"How big is La Gloria?" Slim asked. "If it's really a big place our friends may decide to look for us there."

"I don't think it's big enough for that," Diego said. He asked Carlos, who thought a moment before replying. "That's what I figured," Diego went on. "Carlos says it's got about twenty houses and one small store. Of course, the rice mill is there, and there is a narrow-gauge railroad that's used to take out the rice and sugar cane. But I don't think anybody will look for us because there's only the one road and nobody uses that except the people who live around here, and the nurses and doctors who make regular trips."

Bill yawned again and Slim said they'd better turn in. By this time only the uncles and the older nephews were left at the table. They all stood up when Diego translated Slim's suggestion and quiet *buenas noches* were said all around. Slim took one of the lanterns to light their way to the tents, and a few minutes later Bill and Roger

were asleep while Diego was rubbing his eyes hard to stay awake another moment or two.

"What about me going to Hidalgo tomorrow, Slim?"

Slim smiled at him. "I don't think you're in very good condition to discuss it right now."

"Carlos will wake us in the morning, so I guess we can decide then, huh?"

"That's time enough," Slim said. "Why don't you. . . ." He stopped suddenly. There were footsteps nearby. With a swift motion he blew out the light and pulled the gun out of his duffle bag. The footsteps came nearer. Then a whisper reached them.

"Diego."

"It's my uncle," Diego said to Slim. He walked to the tent opening and spoke into the darkness. Then he listened a moment to the answer and turned his head toward Slim. "They're taking turns standing guard tonight, in case somebody comes."

"I don't think that's necessary," Slim said.

"It's all settled. Tío Arturo is taking the first watch and he'll be relieved by my other uncles."

"Tell them that I want to take a turn, too—if they insist on doing this."

Diego spoke into the dark again and there was a short but crackling answer. "He says no. We have to get some sleep. There are enough of them to make it easy."

Slim shrugged. "When you come up against Mexican friendship, I guess the best thing to do is surrender." He grinned. "Tell him O.K. And thanks."



CHAPTER EIGHT

THEY SLEPT WELL in spite of the suddenly chill night air, and all of them were cheerful as they walked down to the brook to wash up in the morning. The sun was just peeping over the hills when they got back to the tents, but they found that most of the family had already gone to the fields. Tío Ramon, however, had waited, and he joined them as they sat down to a breakfast of eggs and coffee with hot milk.

There was an exchange of *buenos días*, and then he spoke to Diego briefly.

"It was quiet during the night," Diego translated. "No one came."

"I didn't think anybody would," Slim answered. "At

least, not so soon. What will happen tonight is another story."

"What about going to Hidalgo?" Diego asked.

Slim refilled his cup with the coffee-milk combination. "I've been thinking about it. In your disguise," he grinned a little, "you should be safe enough. Especially if Carlos goes with you." He looked around. "I don't see him, though, and maybe he's got too much work to do to waste a day like that."

Diego shook his head. "He said yesterday that he could go. As a matter of fact we can take bananas in and sell them in the market. That's probably what he's doing now—getting some."

"Does he just go out and pick them off the trees?" Bill asked.

"Practically," Diego swung around to point to the hills. "They grow almost wild up here."

"I guess that's why they're so small," Roger said.

"They're a different kind of banana from the ones we get at home. Anyway, Slim," Diego continued, "if Carlos can make the trip, is it all right to go?"

"I don't see why not," Slim admitted.

"I'd like to go along," Bill said. He saw the look on Slim's face and added hurriedly. "Never mind, I know I can't."

"We'd better get going then. If we get to the market too late we'll be conspicuous." He spoke to his uncle, telling him of the proposed trip.

Tío Ramon nodded. He pointed over their head toward the hills.

They turned to look and saw Carlos leading a burro down the steep incline. There were two baskets slung over the animal's back, each filled with small reddish-

brown bananas. Carlos waved to them and when he reached more level ground he urged the burro into a faster pace by pulling on the lead rope.

Diego left the table and headed for the tents, calling something to his cousin. When he reappeared a moment later he was once again dressed as a Mexican boy, and standing beside Carlos he looked so much like him that no one would have guessed they'd been born in different countries.

Carlos led up another burro, divided the load between the two animals, and then mounted his, sitting up close to the baskets which were slung well forward.

"Got any money with you?" Slim asked.

Diego nodded. "A couple of pesos. That's enough." He got up on his burro, which was so small that Diego's feet hung close to the ground. "We should be back early this afternoon."

Carlos said something suddenly and pointed down the road toward La Gloria. His father stood up and looked in that direction.

"What's the matter?" Roger asked.

Diego questioned his uncle briefly before answering. "It's an old man from La Gloria going to the Hidalgo market. We'd better get out of sight and let him go ahead."

Slim got up. "Good idea." They all moved behind the nearest house.

Ramon was saying something else—something that made Diego grin widely. But as his uncle continued, the grin faded and was replaced by a look of embarrassment.

"What'd he say?" Bill asked.

"He says that Chucho—the man who's coming—talks like an old woman."

"What else did he say?" Slim asked.

Diego looked even more embarrassed, and his dark face turned even darker as he flushed. "My uncle said that Chucho doesn't like Americans."

"Oh." Slim looked as though he were sorry he had asked, because it was evident that Diego, his cousin and his uncle were all distressed at having mentioned it.

"It's O.K., Diego," Roger said. "It's exactly what happened to you back home, so don't worry about it on our account."

"Sure," Bill added. "There are people like that all over."

"There may be a perfectly good reason for his feeling," Slim went on. "In fact, until recently, most Americans who came to Mexico did so only for what they could get out of the country. And there are some like that now, too, of course."

Ramon, who had been listening patiently, suddenly broke into speech. Diego nodded, and then his eyes opened wide. "He says that Chucho didn't always dislike Americans. But two weeks ago he sold a rug to some Americans in the plaza in Hidalgo, and the money they gave him was counterfeit."

"Counterfeit!" Roger almost exploded.

"So," Slim said quietly. "Maybe what we have isn't the first shipment. Maybe they've got regularly scheduled deliveries."

The boys all looked thoughtful, but realized this was not the time to go into another discussion of their curious and troublesome cargo.

When the old man was out of sight over a hill, the two boys mounted again. Diego turned to Slim. "I almost forgot. You won't be able to speak to my uncle. Do you

want me to tell him anything before we go? Is there anything you want to do?"

Slim shook his head. "I've got some books I can read in the tent. Maybe I'll go up in the hills and get a sun bath. But we'll be careful to keep out of sight of strangers."

"I'd like to see them work in the fields," Roger said, and Bill added, "Me too."

"That's easy." Diego spoke to his uncle who nodded and answered.

"He says he'll take you down to the rice fields, because they're far from the road and no one will see you there. Anything else?"

"What about lunch?" Bill asked. "It would be terrible if we starved to death because we couldn't ask for food."

They laughed and when Diego translated, his uncle and cousin joined in. "Tío Ramon says not to worry. You can always manage to ask for food in sign language." He nodded to Carlos, who kicked his heels to start his burro moving. Diego's animal followed the other.

"Don't get too close to the old man ahead," Slim reminded them.

Diego waved back. "We'll be careful."

The burros set their own pace, about as fast as a leisurely walk—Carlos explained that trying to get them to move faster was more tiring to the rider than it was to the animal. They followed the road for about a mile and then turned off onto a path that led up into the hills, where the road turned left to skirt higher ground.

As they climbed high above the valley they could see the road running across the fields below, and Diego could even make out the ravine and the brook that had almost

stopped them the day before. It was easy to see how the trail reduced the distance to town by climbing the ridge instead of going around it.

Once as they topped a rise they caught sight of old Chucho a mile or so ahead of them. Carlos stopped the burros to let the distance between them widen.

"Tell me, Diego," he said as they waited, "what will we do when we reach Hidalgo?"

Diego shrugged. "That is something I do not know. It will be necessary for me to look in at the police station, to see if a certain man is still in the city. Then I will, perhaps, visit a gasoline station to see if another man—an American—waits there. Then we will see."

"And I?" Carlos said. "What shall I do?"

"First we must sell the bananas, I think. Will that take long?"

"Who knows? If we sell them all to the people it will take several hours. If we must hurry, I can sell them to the hotel in much less time—and for less money. But the money does not matter today. My father has told me to be of the greatest assistance to you, no matter what happens to the bananas." He looked ahead and saw that Chucho was now a good distance away. "Let us go again."

"See," Carlos continued as they proceeded along a niche worn into the hill. "Below is the village where our friends live—those you would not let us summon last night."

A mile or two from the base of the hill Diego could see the thatched huts they had passed yesterday. In the fields surrounding the houses he could make out the little specks that were the people working. Several teams of oxen were pulling some sort of implements through

sugar-cane fields and, in the flooded rice paddies, other workers were standing knee deep in water harvesting the rice.

Diego was looking at the peaceful scene below him, but his mind was busy with the task ahead. He was convinced that with the exception of a face-to-face encounter with either Smith or the Mexican, he would be unrecognized in the city. Therefore he did not need Carlos with him. It would be better if Carlos established himself in the market and kept his ears open for anything that would give them a hint of their enemies' movements. Any unusual activity of the police, for example, would be common gossip, and there was no better place to pick up gossip than in the market place.

"I think, Carlos," he said, "it would be better if you were to go to the market as usual. Listen carefully for anything you may hear about strange Americans, and especially for any talk of the police. I will do what I have set out to do, and then I will join you. Then we can decide what further action is needed."

"Good. You will go to the market with me so that you will know where I am."

"Yes." Diego thought a moment. "Which will be better, Carlos? If I go with the burro or without? Which will appear to be more natural?"

"It makes no difference. I often go with the burro when I walk through the city, and I often go without." He prodded his burro which had stopped to nibble a patch of grass. "I believe that it might be better if you did not take the burro."

"Why?"

"Because if you are forced to go rapidly the burro will

be a trouble." He grinned. "They do not like to move rapidly."

"I think you are right."

To Diego, accustomed to traveling at high speeds in an automobile, their snail's pace seemed to be getting them no place at all. But they were descending gradually, and after half an hour of this slow descent they reached the bottom of the ridge and rejoined the road about a mile from the outskirts of Hidalgo, plainly visible directly ahead.

Carlos led the way through a maze of streets until they reached the market, already well filled with both buyers and sellers. They went into the market place for a block before Carlos stopped and dismounted.

"This is our place," he said. "Can you find your way to the plaza?"

"I think so." Diego slipped off the burro which seemed entirely unconcerned about having reached a resting place. "I will return as quickly as I can."

"Do not hurry. I am accustomed to staying here for many hours." Carlos tapped a package. "Also, I have brought something to eat."

Diego turned and in a moment was swallowed up in the slowly moving crowd. Taking special care to note landmarks which would help him in returning, he walked out of the market section and up the slight grade to the plaza. Once there, he looked around to impress upon his mind the street that led back to the market, and then he walked toward the police headquarters a block away.

The big black sedan was not in sight, but that didn't surprise Diego. If the Mexican were still there, he reasoned, his car would by now be in the patio at the rear.

He sauntered around the building, casually. But there was no means of entry into the patio except by scaling a ten-foot wall, and this method he discarded. He might too easily be seen and, even if no one noticed him, the broken glass embedded in the top of the wall would cut his skin to ribbons.

He looked about for a tree to climb. There was none high enough or near enough to the wall to allow him to look over it. And then he saw that directly across the street stood an ancient cathedral. The tower was high—high enough, Diego thought, to let him look down into the patio.

Hat in hand he entered the old church and, among others who were entering and leaving, no one took any notice of him. On his left was the worn stone stairway leading to the tower. Diego looked around to make sure no one was watching him and then ran up the steps. The first opening in the tower was too low to do him any good, but the second narrow window was almost three stories above the ground. Through it he could see clearly into the enclosed square behind the police headquarters.

One quick look told him all he wanted to know. The black sedan was there. Diego returned to the street.

He turned his steps toward the hotel from which Slim had tried to call Mexico City the day before. Would the phone be under guard? Here he had no difficulty in finding the answer to his question. He could see into the lobby from the street, and into the small room where the phone was. He could also see a policeman lounging in one of the chairs in the lobby.

He continued walking toward the telegraph office whose sign he saw a block away. There were several

people in the office, he saw through the window, and one of them was a policeman. But just as Diego was starting to move on, one of the customers inside handed in a telegram. When he straightened up, Diego gulped. It was the Mexican.

Diego walked quickly for half a block before he dropped back into his lazy saunter.

Diego supposed he should be getting panicky at these signs of the gang's effectiveness, but on the contrary he felt almost relieved at seeing Slim's forecasts working out. Slim had expected to find that all avenues of exit and means of communication would be blocked—and, indeed, that was Slim's hope.

Because if every path *was* blocked, and Smith still couldn't find any sign of them, the gang would be more easily convinced that Slim had managed to slip by somehow before the blockade had been set. Another day or two with no sign of Slim, and Smith and the Mexican might be expected to relax and devote their efforts to catching up to them in Mexico City.

Feeling the way he did, Diego almost decided not to bother checking the gas station. Whether he learned anything there or not made little difference to their plans, he thought. All they had to do was lay low and. . . .

The blast of a horn behind him made Diego jump from the middle of the narrow street to the side in one leap. Before he had time to turn around, a car swept by—Smith's car. Diego, his heart still pumping furiously from the scare the horn had given him, watched the car screech around the corner.

Diego was so sure that he knew Smith's destination that he didn't even quicken his pace, and when he reached the corner he found he'd been right. Smith's car was pulled

up in front of the gas station. This was ground Diego had been over before and there was no reconnoitering to do.

He walked down the alley alongside the station and seated himself against the wall near the opening he had noticed the day before.

Smith's voice came through as clearly as if he'd been sitting right next to Diego. The man was clearly angry.

"This is ridiculous!" he said in Spanish. "They disappeared as if the earth had swallowed them up. They haven't entered San Luis Potosí and they didn't leave the road between here and there. That much I'm sure of."

"They didn't go back to the highway," the attendant said, his voice much more restrained. "Of that *I* am sure. There has been a watch here continually since they arrived yesterday. If what you tell me is true, they must still be in the city."

"They are not here!" Smith was emphatic, and his voice rose even higher.

Diego grinned to himself. How different Smith had sounded when he had first stopped and offered to help them.

"I tell you," Smith continued, "that it is impossible for an American and three boys in a new automobile to hide in a city as small as this one without people talking about it. Where could they be? I have checked every hotel and every house that accommodates tourists. I have questioned every café and restaurant."

"If I believed in magic . . ." the attendant said.

"Bah! Magic. Do not be a fool! They have left the city."

"Impossible. There is no other way to leave Hidalgo except by this road."

"No?" Smith's voice took on a crafty note. "You are

certain? Then perhaps you would like to look at this map."

There was a rustling of paper, and Diego sat up straighter, wishing he could see what they were looking at.

"See? A road that goes to the village of Limon, another that goes to San Pedro, and a third that goes to La Gloria."

Diego leaped to his feet, ready to run back to the market and start for home. If Smith had found out that much—He checked himself. There was no rush yet.

"Ah! Those roads!" The attendant sounded contemptuous. "No one could hide in those tiny villages. And beyond them, the roads go only into the hills. If the American took any of them he must return here."

"And if he is not in a hurry to return," Smith asked, "must I wait?"

"What else?"

There was a pause during which the map rustled as it was refolded. Then Smith spoke, and his voice had fallen to its customary quietness, but it sounded even more dangerous than when he had been shouting. "No, my friend. I will not wait. With two million pesos at stake, we do not sit and hope. We act! I will go look for them."

Diego swallowed hard and took a step away from the wall. No more waiting for them either. They had to act—and quickly.



CHAPTER NINE

BUT BEFORE DIEGO could take more than a single step, the attendant spoke again.

"That, you cannot do."

Diego relaxed. Perhaps the attendant could talk Smith out of his idea. Perhaps—

"And why not?" Smith asked. "Would it take me so long to travel over these short roads and make inquiries about my good friend and the three boys?"

"It would not take long," the attendant agreed, "but it might take long enough so that while you were looking on one road, they were returning here by another. Remember, you told me that this American drives like a crazy one. If you were to miss him by as much as a few

hours, he would be so far away that you could perhaps never catch him."

Again there was silence while Smith thought the matter over. "You may be right. But do you have a better plan?"

"Yes."

That single word dashed Diego's hopes to the ground again. The attendant was evidently a clever and wily customer, Diego realized, and perhaps more dangerous than Smith.

"Why not go down to the market? There you will find people from all the villages you spoke of. Ask them—they will know if there are strangers in their neighborhood. Then—when you know which road these Americans have taken—you can follow them safely because they will have no way of escaping you."

"That is a good plan," Smith said after a momentary hesitation. "Look after my car. If I discover what I want to know in the market place, I will return for it."

Diego waited to hear no more. He ran down to the end of the alley and then walked as rapidly as he dared. His first thought was to get Carlos and return to Slim as fast as the burros could be made to go. But then he had another idea—one that pleased him so well that he was actually grinning when he reached Carlos.

His cousin must have been doing a thriving business, for only one basket of bananas still remained. Diego went close to speak quietly.

"The American Señor Smith will soon come here," he said, "to find people from La Gloria, Limon, and San Pedro."

"What for?"

"Do not interrupt, Carlos. There is not much time."

Carlos nodded.

"He comes to find these people that he may ask if they have seen us."

Carlos looked up quickly. "Then we must return quickly."

"No, Carlos. This is what we must do. When this American comes, I must hide because he would recognize me. But you, he does not know. When he comes you will go to him and try to sell him bananas. He will ask you which is your village. You will say La Gloria."

"But then he will ask me if I have seen you and your friends."

Diego nodded. "But you must not answer him. You must say you are but a boy, but that over there is an old man from La Gloria who knows everything." Diego pointed to the next corner.

Carlos turned to look. "Chucho!"

Diego laughed. "Why not? He knows of no Americans in La Gloria, so he can tell the truth. And if he does not like Americans and is impolite to Señor Smith? Are we to worry about that?"

Carlos laughed. "My father will like that joke," he said. "And old Chucho will also like talking to an American."

Diego looked up and gripped his cousin's arm. "Quick. There he is. In the light suit. I will wait here with the burros. You go to him."

Carlos took a handful of bananas and walked forward. Smith was approaching slowly, as if trying to make up his mind which person to question first.

"Bananas, señor?" Carlos offered.

Smith stopped. "They are very nice," he said in Spanish. "Where do they grow?"

"In La Gloria, señor. My village."

Smith looked surprised. "La Gloria. I have heard of it."

I believe a friend of mine—an American with three boys—is hunting there now. Have you seen him?”

“I am but a boy,” Carlos said. “But over there is an old man from La Gloria who knows everything. Perhaps he has seen your friends.”

Smith looked up. “That old man on the corner?”

Carlos nodded. “Bananas?” he asked again.

Smith handed Carlos a peso, but waved away the fruit. Carlos thanked him with an impish grin, as Smith continued on toward the old man.

By the time Smith reached the spot, Diego, his sombrero low over his face, managed to be interestedly inspecting a varied assortment of secondhand tools that were spread out on the ground near Chucho.

“I hear,” Smith began pleasantly, “that you live in La Gloria.”

Chucho looked up, saw the American and turned away without a word.

“Are you deaf, old one?”

“I can hear.”

“Are you from La Gloria?”

“Yes.” The old man snapped out the one word and then relapsed into stony silence.

Smith took several crumpled peso notes out of his pocket and held them out, but Chucho made no attempt to take them. Smith looked surprised.

“Eh, old one? You do not like money?”

Chucho looked up at him with a glassy stare. “I do not like gringo money. I do not like gringos.”

Smith looked at him for a moment. “And what is the matter with gringo money?”

“It is no good. It is but worthless paper. It is false, like the gringos.”

"This money is false?" Smith looked at it closely, and Diego had to work hard to keep from laughing out loud. "This is good money. Here, look at it."

Grudgingly, the old man took the bills and inspected them closely. "Yes," he said. "It is good." He handed it back but Smith refused it.

"No, old one. It is for you. Did some Americans give you worthless money?"

Chucho nodded. "They bought my serape which took me two weeks to make, and they gave me money which was no good."

Smith nodded understandingly. "That is the way Americans are. I myself am no longer an American. I have become a Mexican citizen."

Diego's gasp was almost loud enough to be heard.

Chucho looked a little less hostile. "What do you want to know of La Gloria?"

"I think that perhaps an American with three young boys have come there in an automobile. Do you know if this is true?"

Chucho shook his head. "There is no American in La Gloria. I have seen no stranger in the neighborhood since the last visit of the doctor three months ago."

"You are certain?"

"I am an old man, señor. I no longer work in the fields so I have time to see everything. There is no American in my village." He shook his head. "Of this I am certain."

Smith nodded. "Good. I will have to look elsewhere. You have been of much help." He turned to leave, and as he did he added, "Remember to look well at money that Americans give you. It is not to be trusted."

Chucho spat in the dust for an answer.

Half an hour later, having disposed of the remainder of

the bananas at the hotel, the boys were leaving the city. The burros walked at a slightly faster pace now that they were headed toward home, and Diego and Carlos ate their food as they rode. It was only one o'clock when they reached their destination and, after hunting up Tío Ramon, they went to the tents to report to Slim.

The story had to be told twice—once to Slim in English and then to Tío Ramon in Spanish. But each telling was a great success, for both Slim and the Mexican roared at Smith's encounter with Chucho. But when Tío Ramon and Carlos went off to the fields, Slim sobered down.

"You did a good job," he said. "And it looks as if they'll let us alone here now. If we can stay hidden for another few days. . . ."

"Hey, Slim!" Roger's voice rang out. "Diego's back." He and Bill pounded into the tent. "Oh. You're here. What happened?"

Once again the story was told.

"Boy!" Bill said. "I sure wish I could have seen old Smith's face."

"Yeah," Roger said. "But what Smith said about Americans—that's a dirty trick. Blaming all of us just because *he's* a crook." He thought a moment. "It doesn't make much sense, anyway. If I were a counterfeiter I'd try and soft-pedal the thing—and not warn people to look out for phony money. If that story gets around, it'll be harder for him to get rid of the stuff, won't it?"

Slim got up and stretched. "I said before that there are a lot of things we don't know about this business, and the more we learn about it the crazier it seems in some respects. But, as I also said before, all I want to do is to turn this money over to some American official and take a vacation."

"So?" Bill said. "How are we going to do that?"

"As Diego says, who knows?" Slim grinned. "But I think it'll be something like this: We'll give them another couple of days to get good and disgusted. They'll have to assume we got away somehow, and when they do they'll begin to look for us someplace else. Diego can make another trip to town the day after tomorrow. If the guard has been lifted by then, we'll make a break that night."

"At night?" Diego asked. "Over that road back to town?"

Slim nodded. "We can start from here at dusk, so that we'll cross the ravine before it gets pitch dark. Then we'll head right back to the Pan-American Highway. That's where they'll least expect us, I should think."

"That means driving over those mountains in the dark," Roger reminded him.

"Sure. Bue we'll be fresh. And once we get on the highway, we'll keep going until we get to Mexico City. The only thing is—"

"What, Slim? Something else wrong?" Roger asked.

Slim looked at Diego. "Just the same old problem. Your relatives. I feel like a dog, taking advantage of them like this. They treat us like visiting royalty, and we deny them even the pleasure of showing off their new-found nephew."

"They're enjoying it," Diego said. "Of course, they would like to introduce all of us to their neighbors, but they're getting a big kick out of the mystery."

"Well," Slim sounded dubious. "I hope you're right. Do you suppose you could talk them into having a more modest meal tonight? I'm afraid we're costing them too much—and your uncle won't accept my money to buy provisions with."

"I'll try." Diego walked off toward the huts, while Slim and the boys began a leisurely climb of the hill behind the tents. The ground rose rapidly, and before they had gone more than a thousand feet they were high enough above the ground to see the huts and the fields spread out before them. Soon they could see Diego climbing up to join them.

When he saw them he waved and pointed to his left. They looked in the direction he was indicating.

"That must be Chucho returning from Hidalgo," Roger said.

"Diego must want us to keep out of sight." Slim led the way back into the shadows of the trees, and they waited for Diego there.

"I told Tío Ramon about tonight," he said. "But he just laughed and said the food was women's business. He also says he'll post guards again tonight."

"What for?" Bill asked.

"That's what I said," Diego answered, "but he seemed to like the idea so I didn't argue too much." He looked down the hill until he found Chucho plodding along the road. "I'm glad you got out of sight, just in case he decided to look up. Carlos says he really does see everything that goes on."

"Let's go up higher," Roger suggested. "I want to see where they plant the corn."

"That's way up," Diego grinned. "Are you sure you want to climb that far?"

"Wait a minute." Slim stopped the discussion. "I have an idea—about what we could do for your relatives."

They all looked at him expectantly. "Instead of them getting dinner tonight, let's us do the cooking."

"What!" Bill exclaimed. "We can't cook, and anyway

we haven't got any food. And it will be pretty silly if we take their food and spoil it."

"Who says we haven't got food?" Slim said. "Don't forget that in the back of the car we've got about fifty pounds of canned goods that we brought along to use when we wanted to camp out."

"Yeah," Bill agreed. "But what kind of food have we got?"

Diego's eyes were beginning to sparkle. "This'll be good. Tío Ramon was right, you know. Down here men never even think of cooking—that's woman's work. And I don't think my family ever used canned goods either—they'll wonder what kind of a meal you can get out of little cans."

"Let's go down and investigate our supplies," Slim suggested. "Shall we?"

"Sure," Bill said. "It's the least we can do. But I hope we don't poison them."

They returned to the car and hauled the carton of food out of the back. There were over thirty cans of various kinds, and they stacked them in neat piles so that they could see what they had.

"Ten cans of chicken," Slim counted.

Bill snorted. "That's a drop in the bucket compared to what we went through last night."

"Don't be so sure," Roger said. "This is all meat and no bones, and each can is a pound and a half. That's fifteen pounds."

"That's equal to about five live chickens," Diego added. "I'm afraid it isn't quite enough at that—not for the whole crowd."

"Now who put this in?" Slim asked. "Canned codfish."

"How much?" Diego asked.

"Five cans—a pound apiece."

"What else?" Roger was writing the items down.

"Five cans of shrimp." Slim sounded disgusted. "Who made out the list anyway?"

Roger looked at his brother. "Sounds like you."

"Well, I like shrimp and codfish," Bill said defensively.

"On a camping trip?"

"If I like a thing, I like it no matter where I'm going to eat it."

"Sounds reasonable when you put it that way," Slim admitted. "But it sure looks like strange food for a camping trip."

"What else?"

"A can of bouillon cubes." Slim read the label. "They're chicken flavored. Make chicken broth, I guess." He picked up more cans. "Powdered milk. And two cans of powdered eggs."

Roger looked at the complete list. "I certainly don't see what kind of a meal we can make with this assortment."

"I think we'll do all right," Diego said. "We'll make a *paella*."

"A what?" Bill asked.

Diego grinned. "It's not a Mexican dish, but I think they'll like it."

"Do you know how?" Roger asked.

"I've seen my mother make it," Diego answered. "She learned how from a Spanish family. And I know you can put practically anything you want in it."

"Like a stew?" Slim asked.

"Sort of. The main thing is chicken and rice. Then you add fish and clams or shrimps, and some hot sausage."



Ramon's wife picked up one of the cans.

"That's fine," Bill said. "We don't have any rice and we don't have sausage."

"They'll have that here. You put everything in one of those big earthenware pots, add spices, and then let it cook for a couple of hours."

"Sounds all right," Slim said cautiously, "but suppose it won't work?"

"It'll work. We'll use the same seasoning they used yesterday in the chicken and rice. We can make soup with the cubes, too."

"Well, I'm willing to risk the reputation of the United States if you are," Slim decided.

They trooped down the hill and went with Diego while he spoke to Tío Ramon. At Diego's first words, Ramon shook his head negatively. He continued to do so for a minute or so, but finally he shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"He thinks Americans are crazy," Diego translated. "He can't understand why men should want to cook. But he says of course if we really want to do it—"

Diego's uncle said something else at which Diego laughed.

"He asks if we mind if the women stand near us in case something happens. He wouldn't like to go hungry."

"I don't blame him," Slim said. "Tell him we'd appreciate any help we can get. But we'll do the work—they can advise us."

When this was translated into Spanish, Tío Ramon asked another question which Diego answered in a few words. Ramon looked startled. He said something again but Diego shook his head. The Mexican shrugged his shoulders again and looked at his nephew as if there were something wrong with him.

Diego turned to explain. "He asked what food we needed and I told him we had everything except some rice and sausage."

"I don't think he believes you," Slim said. "Let's bring the food over."

When they returned, laden down with their supplies, they found that Ramon had called his wife and his brothers' wives to witness this strange event. Ramon eyed the cans with amazement—the women with hostility.

Ramon's wife picked up one of the cans of chicken and looked at the label.

"Chicken," Diego said in Spanish.

She shook the can. "*¿Pollo?*" she asked. "In here?"

Diego nodded and handed her a can of shrimp. "*Camarones.*"

She shook her head confusedly.

"*Bacalao,*" Diego went on, handing her a can of codfish. Then he smiled as he picked up the can of chicken cubes, opened it, and showed her one of the small squares wrapped in tin foil. "*Sopa.*" He looked at Slim. "I told her this was soup," he grinned.

This was too much for the poor woman. She refused to touch it, and backed away with an expression half of fright and half of pity for her poor nephew.

But the other women were eagerly curious and, at Diego's request, gathered the materials he had asked for. Then they all went inside Ramon's house, and Diego started a charcoal fire in the primitive stove on which they cooked.

He handed Bill a straw fan. "This is your job. Keep that fire hot."

Roger and Slim began to open the cans, and to empty the contents into a huge earthenware dish. The women

followed every move from the doorway, where they stood staring. Ramon had come into the hut with them, but announced firmly that he had nothing to do with the proceedings. He watched them with interest, however, and even went so far as to taste a piece of the chicken.

"*Bueno*," he said, his eyes wide. "*Muy bueno*."

"Sure it's good." Diego grinned.

Under the women's direction he was preparing the rice in the traditional Mexican fashion, using olive oil and saffron. Then this was placed in another earthenware dish and put over the fire which Bill was still laboriously fanning.

It was getting on toward evening by now, and the men and the children were returning from the fields. The crowd outside the hut grew larger and larger until all the relatives were present. Those in the doorway passed back reports of the progress, and the laughter increased each time Slim or the boys attempted some task.

Bill caused a great shout of gaiety when he fanned too hard and smoke billowed up in his face. Roger fared no better when the onion he was cutting caused the tears to stream from his eyes.

The affair was really becoming quite a party, Slim realized, when a loud round of applause greeted Diego's successful effort at turning the rice out of one pot into another without spilling any. They all helped to arrange layers of chicken, fish, shrimp and sausage over it, and then added more rice until the great vessel was full. Then Diego laid bright red strips of hot peppers over the top and declared it finished.

When it had been ceremoniously set on the fire, they all adjourned to the open air.

The boys relaxed wearily, while Tío José entertained the party with stories which Diego translated to his friends. Once Ramon's wife slipped away, entered the house and carefully lifted the lid of the pot of *paella*. They could see her sniff. Her face had a surprised look when she spoke to her relatives in the doorway.

"¡Bueno! Muy bueno."

A burst of delighted applause greeted her words. But instead of returning to her place, she padded over to her husband and whispered something to him. He chuckled and whispered back.

Diego grinned. "They're laughing at those cubes. My aunt said no one could make soup out of them. They're waiting for us to start."

"Is it time?" Roger asked. "Think the *paella's* nearly done? The soup'll only take a minute."

Slim and the boys all went in to inspect their handiwork.

"It's about finished," Diego decided. "We'll let it keep stewing while we make the soup." He turned to the doorway. "*La sopa*," he announced.

All the Mexicans laughed hilariously, but they moved a little closer so they could watch through the door.

Diego set another pot over the coals, and filled it with water. "How much is in there, Slim?"

"I'd guess about a gallon. Is that enough?"

Diego figured. "Four quarts to a gallon, four cups to a quart. That's only sixteen cups. We need about twice that." He changed the pot for a larger one.

"*El café*," Tío Ramon reminded, in a great shout. "*Y la leche*."

"Gosh!" Diego exclaimed. "I almost forgot. Coffee and

milk." He put the first pot of water back on the fire and, behind it, where the full heat of the charcoal wouldn't reach it, another pot full of milk.

Roger waved the fan again for a while until the coals were white hot, and he himself felt even hotter.

"It says one cube per cup." Slim was reading from the label of the bouillon cube tin. "But maybe we'd better make it stronger to convince them that it's really soup."

They removed the wrapping from forty cubes and, when the water was good and hot, dropped them into the pot. Diego began to stir rapidly to dissolve the cubes.

"Smells good," he grinned, in a few minutes. He beckoned to his aunt and uncle, and pointed to the pot.

His aunt sidled up to it suspiciously. Very carefully she bent over and sniffed. Then her eyes opened wide and her mouth fell open.

She took the spoon out of Diego's hand, dipped up a little of the broth, and brought it to her mouth slowly as if she were afraid it would jump out and bite her. Finally she tasted it. Then she turned dramatically to the door. "*Bueno. Es sopa.*"

Once more the applause rang out.

"She admits it's soup," Diego translated unnecessarily. "Well, if my other aunt has the *tortillas* ready, we can start eating."

The dinner was a success from the start. Even if the food had been badly prepared, everyone would have pretended to enjoy it because the *Americanos* had worked so hard over it. But the food was really good. All the uncles made speeches about its remarkable quality. The speeches, like the meal, lasted a long time.

"But I don't think I'll be a cook, just the same," Bill

said, as Slim and the boys finally walked back to the tents. "Anyway, not if I have to cook on charcoal stoves."

"It was fun, though," Roger said. "I think Diego's people enjoyed it too."

Diego yawned. "No doubt of that. They'll talk about this meal for years."

Bill stumbled sleepily. "We should have brought a lantern. Boy, I'm tired."

"I'm glad we talked your uncle out of keeping watch tonight," Slim said. "They work too hard during the day to stay up half the night."

"Ouch!" Bill backed away from the cactus as they approached their hideaway.

"Here. Let me go into the tent first," Slim said. "I'll light the lamp."

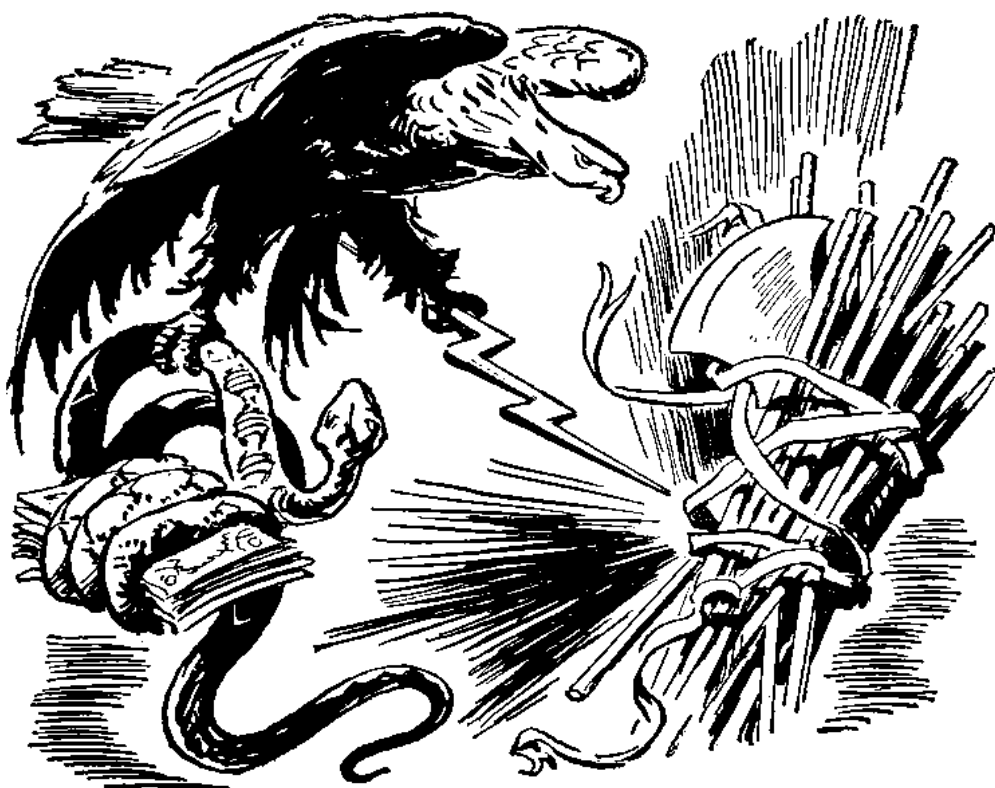
They waited in the doorway while he stepped inside. A moment later the match flared up and the lampwick caught.

And then Roger saw something shining back in the corner in the shadow. He leaned forward to look better.

"Slim!" he said hoarsely.

"What?" Slim looked at him and then turned to follow his glance.

The Mexican sat there, a faint smile on his face and a dangerous-looking gun in his hand.



CHAPTER TEN

SLIM AND THE BOYS stood stock still, as if some magical spell had suddenly turned them to stone.

For a long moment the Mexican was just as motionless, but when the silence was finally broken it was he who spoke.

"Please sit down," he said. "Or courtesy will force me to stand—and to tell the truth, I am very weary." He waved the gun negligently to indicate the other mattress.

But the gesture seemed to remind him of the gun's existence, and he looked down at it and smiled again—almost apologetically this time, Roger thought dazedly to himself. He wondered how Slim was taking this startling turn of events, but somehow couldn't tear his eyes away from the Mexican's face to find out.

"First let us clear matters up so that I may dispense with this," the Mexican was saying. "Permit me to introduce myself—Miguel Santos, of the Mexican Secret Police." He reached inside his pocket with his free hand and pulled out a wallet, which he opened and tossed across to Slim.

Roger did turn toward Slim then, and moved instinctively closer to him. And to let him know that he wasn't too scared to think at all, and that he at least couldn't be taken in by such an obvious ruse, he said, "Anybody could have credentials printed. Couldn't they, Slim?"

"Wait a minute." Slim was looking at the card carefully, and comparing the photograph on it with the face of the man across the tent. "It appears to be legitimate," he said then, slowly. "But Roger's right, of course. Anybody could have a card printed."

"True," the Mexican admitted. "But you must agree that it would be difficult for anyone not of the police to know all that I know about you. And I do not mean," he added, "that I merely know you have two million pesos in counterfeit money concealed in your car."

There was an instant's blank pause.

"Yeah?" Bill challenged him. His voice broke on the word, but he rushed on. "How much do you know? You could learn a lot about us from our tourist visas—anybody could. And you probably sneaked a look at them somehow at the same time you were hiding the money in the car."

"I hid the money?" The Mexican's eyebrows lifted, and unexpectedly he smiled a broad genial smile, as if he were really pleased. "How clever you all are! That is excellent. But listen: How do you think I learned that you and your brother, Roger, are sons of the engineer

Baxter, who is now engaged in putting a tunnel through Baldhead Mountain in the state of Colorado? Or that you," he indicated Diego, "are Diego Montez, whose father has a small farm near by that place? And that you and your father were in serious trouble there recently? Eh? How do you think I learned all that, if I am not of the police?"

"From the newspapers," Roger told him promptly.

"Ah—true again, perhaps. You are indeed difficult to convince. But let me try again." The dark face looked directly at Slim. "You, señor, are Robert Warner, unmarried, twenty-eight years old. . . ." His voice droned on as he related what was practically a full story of Slim's life. "And," he concluded, "if you still do not believe me, perhaps this air-mail letter I received this morning will help."

Slim took the letter, glanced at the signature, and whistled. "From my chief!"

"Exactly. Read it, please. Aloud."

Slim began slowly:

In accordance with your telegraphed request, I am sending the following details. The Montez family came originally from the small town of La Gloria, near Hidalgo. This information was taken from federal files, and without direct questioning of the family, in accordance with your suggestion. The parents know nothing of your queries. If it will be of any aid to you, the Baxter boys were also involved with Warner in a smuggling case at Seaview, N. J., last year.* Warner is on vacation now, but I am sure he will do anything he can to help. The American

* *Stranger at the Inlet*, a Roger Baxter Mystery.

end of the case you are working on is being handled by another department, so I have no authority to assign Warner to you. If necessary, however, I can have him transferred temporarily.

Slim waited a moment when he had finished, and then he said, "I don't think we need have any more doubts, boys."

Santos sighed deeply. "Good. Now I can put this away." He tucked the automatic back into a shoulder holster. "And now we can proceed."

"I still don't get it!" Bill exploded. "We knew the police were tied up in this. So why should we—?"

"We only thought so because we saw him—" Roger nodded toward Santos—"go into the police headquarters. But if he's O.K.—"

"He can't arrest us, can he, Slim?" Bill swung around excitedly. "He doesn't think that's our money, does he?"

"Please." Santos held up his hand. "It is a long, complicated story, and we do not have too much time."

"He's right, boys," Slim said quietly. "Let's hear what he has to say. I don't think we're going to be arrested right now, anyway."

"I just want to know if it was my fault you found us," Diego spoke up for the first time. "Did you trail us out here this afternoon?"

"¿Como?" Santos asked. "What?"

Slim grinned. "I guess that's something you missed. Diego made a scouting trip into Hidalgo today. He thought maybe you'd followed him back here. But I gather you got your information about this place from that letter. Come on, boys—let's sit down. We've got a lot of ground to cover."

"Yes, please. So I have begged you," Santos said. "It was indeed from the letter," he added, as they seated themselves on the other mattress. "I did not see you," he told Diego. "But tell me—what did you yourself discover on this trip?"

Diego hesitated.

"Go on—tell him all about it," Slim said.

Roger could hear the other two boys sighing their relief as he himself sighed. It really did begin to seem as if all their troubles were over. Gratefully he sank back on the soft yielding surface, completely relaxed for the first time in days. Now things were in official hands. They didn't have to worry any longer.

"Well," Diego began, "we saw you and Smith both when we reached Hidalgo. So after we came out here, we thought I'd better sneak back and see if I could find out what your plans were."

"It was in Hidalgo that we found out for sure you and Smith were working together," Roger broke in, suddenly eager to impress this quiet dark man with their own detective ability. "But of course we didn't realize you were both—"

"Smith working with me?" Santos interrupted him sharply. And then he laughed. "But of course. A most natural mistake for you to make." He lit a cigarette and added, slowly, through a cloud of smoke, "Smith and I are on the opposite ends of this business. Smith is one of the men I am tracking."

"But—" Roger stopped and gulped. "But that gasoline-station man you talked to—didn't he tell you where Smith was? *He's* working with Smith. Didn't you know that?"

"Si. Of course. Juan is a trusted member of Smith's

gang." Santos grinned. "Unfortunately for Smith, Juan is an even more trusted member of my police force."

"But if you know all about Smith, then why don't you arrest him?" Bill demanded, sitting up straight suddenly. "Did you lose him? Diego saw him just this afternoon, and he could tell you—"

"Wait. Please. I shall explain all in good time." Santos held up a firm hand. "First I want to hear what Diego learned today. He appears to have sharp ears—sharper, perhaps, than those of some of my men."

Briefly Diego finished his story of his activities with Carlos that day, and of how they had diverted Smith to Chucho. When Santos heard of the counterfeit money Chucho had received a few weeks earlier, he interrupted to pull a folded map out of his pocket.

"*Bueno*. Here is a map of central Mexico. These little crosses mark places where counterfeit money has appeared—not just any counterfeit money, but only those bills which have been printed by Smith's gang in the United States."

Solemnly he put another little cross on the map at Hidalgo with a tiny question mark beside it. "If the money which the old man received is the same as the others, it gives us another link in the chain which I am hoping to tighten very soon."

He leaned back and wriggled into a more comfortable position, puffing at his cigarette. "Now perhaps I should talk.

"Let me begin by saying that counterfeiting is but a part of a very ugly business. If we were interested only in catching counterfeiters, we could have done so months ago. Through the co-operation of the United States police, we have discovered where the money is printed,

and who the men are who make it. We have even discovered the entire chain of confederates who bring the money into Mexico, always—as in this case—by hiding it in the car of some innocent tourist.”

“But what are you waiting for?” Roger asked involuntarily. “If you could break up the whole ring—”

Santos nodded. “We could, yes. But the counterfeiters are only—how do you say it?—small potatoes. They are merely tools used by a much more important band of criminals.” Santos paused a moment, and all the joviality vanished from his voice, leaving it cold and hard.

“You see,” he went on, “when we discovered the source of this fountain of bad pesos, some months ago, we also learned that some of the men who seemed to be involved were men we had been watching for years—ever since World War II started.”

“Espionage suspects?” Slim asked quietly.

“During the war, yes. They were engaged in espionage then. We knew about them, but preferred not to arrest them. Instead,” he smiled faintly, “they were permitted to learn only what we wished them to know—for the most part,” he added honestly. “But now—now they seem to be engaged in something different and even more sinister.

“Unfortunately, when we defeated the Fascist countries in the war, we did not defeat fascism,” the sober voice went on. “That, perhaps, you already know. Today certain men—call them Fascists, Nazis, what you will—still hope to be able to impose their ideas upon the world. They have an underground organization here, as they have in other lands.”

The boys looked at each other a little uncomfortably, in the face of such solemnity.

Roger voiced their doubts. "Well, sure. I mean, we've heard that some of the big shots got away, out of Germany and Italy and wherever they were. But if you know about them, and they have to stay—well, underground, as you say—they can't do much harm, can they? I mean, they can't make speeches or anything."

Santos smiled faintly. "You are still young, so perhaps it is understandable that you should think them harmless for that reason. But grown people, too, think as you do. And it is in this very belief that these men find their greatest strength."

"You see, Rog," Slim took it up, "fascism is a state of mind—simply a belief that the majority of people are too stupid to govern themselves, that they should instead be ruled by autocratic leaders, and used merely as producers and soldiers in a war that would eventually make those same leaders the rulers of the world. Every country has its quota of such people. We have ours at home. And—sometimes because they are too stupid to know what they're doing—they can be easily persuaded to make those speeches which the recognized underground criminals are unable to make for themselves. They can be useful in a good many more ways than merely talking, too."

"Exactly," Santos agreed. "They can spread intolerance, race hatred, mistrust of one man for another, of one country for another—all the means by which nation is set against nation. You see, these master criminals believe in the old method of divide and conquer. If they can stir up trouble, or get others to stir it up for them, they are happy. Troubled people are eager to turn to something new—a new leader, a new government. They are willing to believe whatever wild promises are made

to them—and to support the men who make those promises.”

“But I don’t see—” Bill mumbled confusedly.

“You don’t see how such things as intolerance have anything to do with politics?” Santos smiled. “Perhaps Diego can tell you. He met it in Colorado, did he not? People there were ready to blame him and his father for something they did not do, simply because they were ‘foreigners.’ Those people had already acquired a mistrust of ‘foreigners,’ perhaps because someone had told them that ‘foreigners’ were ‘dangerous,’ or ‘dirty’—or simply because the ‘foreigners’ were different from themselves, and stupid people fear and dislike what is different. If that mistrust grows large enough, they might turn to a Fascist leader who promised them he would rid their country of such undesirables. They might even be ready to fight to help establish such a leader.”

“But those people back home,” Diego protested awkwardly, “they just didn’t know any better. I think they understand now, perhaps. And if they’d done a little thinking, they’d have understood before.”

“True,” Santos agreed. “But too many people do not allow themselves to think—or perhaps they do not know how to think. They are not ‘bad,’ they are not ‘Fascists’; but they are very useful to men who *are*. You heard old Chucho today, blaming all Americans for the counterfeit money he had received. Why? Because he himself is a bad man, wishing to make trouble? No, because he is stupid. Because he is too lazy to figure out the truth. He does not know it, but he is sowing the seeds of mistrust that can lead to war.”

There was a moment’s silence, while they all absorbed these words.

"But what are you going to do with people like that?" Roger asked finally. His eyes opened suddenly. "You aren't here to arrest Chucho, are you?"

Santos chuckled. "No. Not for that. And as to what we do with such people—well, that is a question that is bothering many people much cleverer than we are. It will be a slow process—this business of teaching people to think for themselves, to sift out the truth from the lies, to let reason take the place of blind prejudice. Education is always a slow process. You in the United States sometimes forget that in many countries there are millions of people who cannot even read and write—and that is but the beginning of learning, the start of wisdom. No," he shook his head sadly, "we do only what we can, and it is very little. But we must keep trying. And that," he added, sitting up straighter, "is why I am here."

"You mean Smith is one of those Fascists—the real criminal ones?" Bill's eyes were round.

"Naturally," Roger told him. "Don't you get it? Smith was telling Chucho not to trust Americans, wasn't he? That's just what he's been explaining to us."

"Then why don't you arrest him before he causes any more trouble?" Bill demanded.

Santos shook his head. "He is a real Fascist, I think," he said slowly. "And certainly he is a criminal. But, as I told you before, he and even his whole group are merely tools of a larger, even more dangerous gang. Counterfeit money is merely one of the weapons they are using in their plan to undermine the friendship that exists between the nations of the Western Hemisphere."

"Well, heck! They won't be able to do that," Bill said. "Ever since I've been going to school I've been learning

about the Good Neighbor Policy, and—you know—studying about Mexico and South America and all.”

“Good.” Santos smiled. “But the Good Neighbor Policy is a very young idea. Not long ago most Latin-American countries distrusted the United States very much, because of its size and power, and because it seemed to wish only to grow rich at the expense of Latin Americans.”

“And I’m afraid a great many people in our country were guilty of exactly that,” Slim said. “Probably some of them still are.”

Santos went on, “So you see the Fascists think it might be very easy to tear apart this new friendship between the nations, and replace their governments, one by one, with their own kind of power.”

He sat forward. “And now we must get to the business at hand. As I have already suggested, these men I am seeking have been smuggling into this country small amounts of bad money, and distributing it always—very carefully—in those places where the most tourists from the United States travel. Chucho is but one sample of almost a hundred reports we have received—reports of Mexicans who claim to have been given counterfeit bills by your countrymen. Now, having tested the value of their plan, this gang is ready to release the two million pesos you are carrying. This money is to form the basis for a campaign that will spread the length and breadth of Mexico. Everywhere Mexicans will soon be saying—they think—that the *Americanos* are flooding the country with worthless paper. Then, perhaps, Mexicans will refuse to accept money from *Americanos*; they will insult tourists. And sooner or later incidents will be manufactured in which Americans are molested, and the situation

will be ready to serve as cause for a breach in the relations between the two countries."

"Whew!" Roger said. "And we had to walk into this!"

The Mexican's dark eyes flickered at him sympathetically. "So you see," he said, "it is not enough to arrest Smith and the other minor members of this international ring. What we want are the real leaders, and some of those we have not yet tracked down. We hope Smith will lead us to them, as soon as he collects the money you are holding. It is important that we stop this crime at its source, and to do that we must close our net on the headquarters and bring all the participants to trial. Only then will we be able to make clear to the world the viciousness of this plot. Only then will we be able to convince those who need convincing that the danger is real, and that the false ideas already spread are truly false."

"Yeah. I get it now," Bill murmured in a subdued voice.

"I'm afraid," Slim said, "that we must have given you a great deal of trouble the past few days. We didn't mean to obstruct justice. In fact, we've been trying to get word to authorities about this ever since we discovered the money ourselves. But Smith's behavior made us so suspicious—and yours, too, I might add—that we finally came off here to hide until our pursuers gave up." He grinned wryly. "We were determined not let either of you—or whichever of you had planted the money on us—get it back again."

Santos returned the smile. "That is what I imagined you had in mind, when I decided you must have found

what you were so unwillingly carrying in your car. Of course I already knew who you were."

"When did you learn that?" Slim asked curiously.

Santos raised his eyebrows. "Why, even before you crossed the border, of course. My man in Laredo reported in which car the money had been concealed, and I made immediate inquiries. The answer pleased me very much. I thought a trusted American detective could take care of himself should any danger threaten—although of course I was worried because of the boys."

"You don't have to worry about *us*," Bill told him grandly. "Why, we've—" But he subsided at a look from Roger.

"As a matter of fact," Santos smiled, "I found out how well you could take care of yourself, señor Warner, when you disappeared from Victoria." He glanced around at the faces in the yellow light. "And which of you arranged it so that I had a leaking tire that was not caused by a puncture?"

Roger evaded his eyes. "I did. But I didn't know—"

"Naturally." Santos nodded, and the corners of his lips twitched. "And naturally I could not tell you, because that would have meant involving you immediately, and my orders are to keep innocent persons clear of this case if it is at all possible. So I simply hoped that you would park your car and let Smith recover his money. From that time on, he would be watched at every moment—and you could have been continuing your vacation without worry."

"Does Smith know who you are?" Roger asked, forgetting that he had been embarrassed a moment before.

"Yes. He knows. But he does not know how much I

understand about him and his gang. He believes that I seek the counterfeit money, and that I suspect you have it. Of course he intends to get it first. But he does not mind if I suspect you for awhile—it will perhaps make me suspect all tourists from the United States; and if you should be arrested here it would perhaps make you hate Mexicans.” He shrugged. “It all fits in with the plan, you see.”

Slim rubbed his hands together briskly. “Well, now that we’ve done our best to spoil things so far, what do you want us to do?”

“Yeah.” Bill’s voice was eager. “Now that we know what it’s all about we can help.”

“No!” Santos and Slim both spoke at once. They looked at each other and laughed.

“You must not try to *help*,” Santos said quickly. “You must not behave as if you know anything I have told you.”

“But we have to do *something*,” Roger said. “Gosh! This is our business, too.”

“True. It is everybody’s business,” Santos agreed. “But I must insist. We must be very careful now. Smith does not know you are aware of the money, and he must not guess. So you will all, please, reappear in Hidalgo tomorrow afternoon, hinting perhaps that you took an unexpected sight-seeing trip into the hills. Register at a hotel, park your car in a place where Smith can get at it easily, and then do not go near it again.”

“Maybe if he’s out looking for us, he won’t find out we’re in town,” Roger suggested.

“He will find out.” Santos smiled. “I will see to that. Stop at the gas station first, and Juan will then immediately report to Smith that you have returned. I will

also make certain that Smith knows I have left for Mexico City to hunt for you there."

"Will that be true?" Bill asked diffidently.

"It is true I am going to keep out of his sight for awhile, and away from you. I will let him think I have lost you. One of my men will take over the job of watching Smith, of course. And unless you hear otherwise, feel free to leave in the morning. By then the money will have been taken from your car, and your part in all this will be finished."

Santos stood up. "And now I must go. It is late and I have talked too much. I am most sorry to have inconvenienced you further, beyond what you have already suffered over this situation. But the cause is good and we must all do what we can."

"We'll follow your instructions to the letter," Slim promised him solemnly.

Santos shook hands with all of them, and said, "Perhaps we may meet again in Mexico City, in happier circumstances. I will look forward to remaking your acquaintance there."

"And we'll look forward to it, too," Slim said. The others nodded agreement.

Then Santos stepped outside the tent and the darkness swallowed him up. They listened for his footsteps, but heard nothing. A few moments later, however, the faint whinny of a horse drifted through the silence.

"So that's how he got here without anybody hearing him," Roger said, still instinctively speaking in the low voice they had all been using throughout the long conversation.

Bill looked out into the black Mexican night. "I liked him," he said. "I hope we do see him again."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

TAKING LEAVE of their new friends wasn't an easy task, but it was made easier by the deep understanding of Diego's relatives who, without asking any questions, seemed to sense that their guests' departure was necessary. Tío Ramon again said that they were welcome to stay as long as they liked, but beyond that he made no effort to detain them.

They all had lunch together. Even those who worked in the distant fields came in for the farewell. Then Slim took several dozen pictures of the family and the children, so that Diego's mother and father could see how many nieces and nephews they had acquired.

At last, after dozens of embraces and handshakes, the

car started back for Hidalgo while all of Diego's relatives stood in front of their huts to wave good-by. When the boys looked back from half a mile away, they were still there and still waving.

And then they were lost from sight around a bend. A sober silence settled over the car.

Bill, slumped way down in his seat, finally spoke. "That's the way it always happens. You meet a lot of nice people and then you have to go away. I wish they lived up in Seaview."

"That's right," Roger agreed. "We drop in on them out of the clear blue sky. They hide us, feed us, treat us as if we were all their relatives, instead of just Diego—and then we take off—bang!—like this."

Slim glanced briefly over his shoulder at the back seat, where Diego sat stolidly beside Bill, staring straight ahead. "You've got a great bunch back there, Diego. I hope we can stop in on the way back and explain to them what it was all about—and thank them a little more properly for all they did for us."

Diego nodded. "I wasn't thinking about that so much. I was feeling. . . ."

He stopped and they waited for him to go on.

"Feeling what?" Bill asked after a minute.

"It's nothing much," Diego said, his voice very low. "It's just that I feel sort of ashamed."

Bill stared at him in open amazement. "Ashamed? Of what? Not your family?"

"No. Not of them. Of myself on account of them. I mean, on account of what I was thinking about them. I guess. . . ." He stammered and stopped again.

Slim had carefully guided the car over one of the steep little bridges and now, as he picked up speed, he turned

to flash a glance at Diego. "If you're trying to say what I think you are, go ahead. It's probably happened to Roger and Bill, too. I know it happened to me when I was your age."

"Well, it's just that when we were coming here," Diego said in a rush, as if he had to get it out of his system, "I suddenly began to worry about bringing you out. I knew how they probably lived—in those little huts with dirt floors, without electricity or anything. And I began to feel maybe you wouldn't like them."

"You mean," Slim said, "that you were afraid you'd be ashamed of them?"

"Yeah," Diego said gratefully. "That's what I mean."

"And now you're ashamed for having been ashamed."

"Uh-huh."

"But how could anybody be ashamed of them?" Bill protested. "They're swell."

"The trouble with you," Roger answered, "is that you can't remember anything."

"Remember what?"

"Only two years ago at a birthday party Mom had for you. You'd been telling all the kids at school what an important engineer Pop is, and—"

"Well, he is."

"Sure he is. But when the kids came up for the party Pop was dressed in old clothes painting the back porch. And were you ashamed!"

"Oh," Bill reddened. "I forgot about that."

"That's what I just said. But it's the same thing exactly. Isn't it, Slim?"

"Sure. And it happens to most kids at some time or other. What you want to get straight, though, is that being ashamed is just proof of how much you like your people

—and want other people to like them. If you didn't care anything about them, you wouldn't be worrying."

"Yeah, I guess so." Bill and Diego both looked a little more comfortable.

"In case you didn't get the idea, we think your family's great," Roger said.

"I knew that five minutes after you'd met them," Diego admitted.

"And what they eat's O.K., too," Bill grinned, completely recovered now.

"That Smith ought to meet some people like that," Roger went on. "Maybe he'd get some sense in his thick skull and stop trying to make trouble all the time."

"What did you have to bring him up for?" Bill demanded. "You spoiled the whole day."

"But this is the last day he'll spoil for us," Diego pointed out, glad to accept a new subject of conversation. "So I guess we can stand it."

Slim agreed. "Yes, Smith and his friends shouldn't have more than a day or two of freedom left. From what little I know about the case, it seems to me that Santos is playing it just about right—or as well as he could with our interference. They've got a good department down here."

"Good until we messed things up for him." Roger grinned. "If I was Santos I'd put us in jail for obstructing a police officer in the pursuit of his duty—or whatever it is they call it."

"But we didn't know what was behind all that chasing us around," Bill protested.

"Sure," Slim admitted. "He knew it wasn't our fault, but he could have been burned up about it anyway. I think I would have been in his place."

Roger pointed ahead. "Well, there's Hidalgo. We're on our last lap on this merry-go-round."

Slim drove carefully through the narrow streets up to the square. They looked for Santos' car as they passed the police headquarters, but it was not in sight.

"He's probably gone already," Slim said, answering their unspoken question.

"I hope he didn't go too far away."

"What's the matter, Bill? Scared?" Roger laughed.

"I don't think so. But I'd feel better if he was right alongside of us."

Diego grinned. "And a couple of days ago you were sure he was the villain."

"Bill changes his mind fast. Don't let it upset you."

"You've made some mistakes yourself, if I remember correctly," Bill retorted. "Wasn't it you who thought Slim was—?"

"O.K. I give up," Roger said.

Slim pulled in at the gas station and shut off the motor.

"Ah, señor," Juan came to stand beside the car. "And how did you like Guadalajara?"

"What?" Then Slim remembered what they had told Juan the first morning they arrived at Hidalgo. He smiled. "We didn't go after all. We decided to take a little trip back into the hills here. Nice country you have."

Juan nodded, soberly. "And now?"

"We're going to stay overnight here. Can you recommend a hotel?"

"There are several, señor, but I think you will be best satisfied with the one two blocks from here. It is called La Plata."

There was no mistaking the emphasis in Juan's answer.

He was telling them that Santos wanted them in that particular hotel.

"Thank you," Slim said. He started the motor and swung the car around. The sign of the La Plata was visible when the car was facing toward San Luis Potosí, since the hotel was situated directly on the highway. There was a small parking space in front of the building, but Slim chose to drive around to the rear where the parking area was much larger.

"Putting the car back here will give Smith a little more privacy tonight."

"Nothing like extending a helping hand, I always say." Roger got out and stretched. "Looks like a nice hotel at that. Maybe they'll have a shower and plenty of hot water."

"They had nice rooms in that hotel in Victoria," Bill said, "but we didn't get much use out of them."

Slim pocketed the keys and picked up his bag. "We'll use these tonight, all right. Come on. Let's get registered."

They had no difficulty in obtaining two rooms with a connecting bath, and fifteen minutes later Bill was in a steaming hot shower while the rest of them lounged around waiting their turn.

"I suppose," Roger said lazily, "that we ought to unpack our bags."

"Just take out what you need for tonight," Slim advised. "We'll probably be leaving early in the morning." He put his bag on the bed, opened it and took out his shaving things and a toothbrush. "Well, well. Our old friend." He held up his automatic. "I should have returned this to the glove compartment. But tomorrow's soon enough, I guess."

"Next!" Bill came to the door of the room with a towel wrapped around him. "Water's fine. Gives you an appetite."

"What? Again?" Roger began to take off his clothes.

A little later they were all ready to admit that Bill had been right about developing an appetite from the shower. It was only five o'clock, however, and they found the dining room didn't open until six. An hour seemed a long time to wait. Bill managed to dig four chocolate bars out of his bag, and that helped a little.

But waiting still wasn't easy, it soon became evident, and they knew hunger wasn't the only reason. Slim succeeded in finding his book interesting enough to keep at it, but the boys merely leafed through books or magazines and then discarded them to pace around the room. Bill finally gave up all pretense of reading and went to stand at the window, looking out at the highway below.

"If we had rooms in the back of the hotel," he said, "we could keep an eye on the car and see what's going on."

Slim looked up. "Exactly what Santos wouldn't want us to do."

"Yeah, I know. But it would keep us busy."

"Why don't you bring your diary up to date?" Roger suggested. "Plenty has happened since you last wrote in it."

"I think I'll wait until we get all cleared up here first." Bill pressed his nose against the glass. "Hey! Look!"

"What?" Roger and Diego rushed to join him.

"Big herd of cows."

"They're calves," Diego corrected. "Looks like they've just been bought at the market."

"And don't scare us like that," Roger said. "I thought you saw Smith or something."

"Wait a minute." Bill scratched his head. "I think I'm getting an idea."

"I hope not," Roger groaned.

"This isn't about Smith. It's about Diego's family. Why don't we send them a present?"

"They won't want a present," Diego protested.

"But we'd like to give them one," Bill answered. "Wouldn't we?"

Slim laid down his book. "You interest me, Bill. What's your idea?"

Bill sat down on the edge of the bed. "Well, if we were back in the States and we visited somebody, it would be easy to get them a toaster, or a waffle iron, or something. But a present like that would be silly down here, wouldn't it?"

"Electrical equipment would," Roger admitted. "Your penetrating mind has reached that conclusion correctly. So?"

"So why can't we buy them a good calf?" Bill offered triumphantly. "They could raise it and keep it for years."

"People give pets for presents," Roger said. "But I never heard of giving a calf."

"Don't be hasty, Rog," Slim said. "I think Bill's got something there. It would really be a useful gift, and it would go on being useful. But I wouldn't know a good calf from a bad one, or where to buy it, or how to get it out there afterward. We couldn't get it in the car."

"I could pick a good one," Diego offered a little tentatively. "And maybe we could get somebody to take it out to La Gloria for us."

"Swell! That's the first difficulty overcome. But where?"

"There must be some for sale in the market—Diego was just saying that's where that herd probably was coming from. Or maybe there's a special stock market. We could look tomorrow morning," Bill suggested.

"Well," Roger admitted, "if we could give them something, I'll admit I'd feel better."

"Me too."

"It may be expensive," Diego pointed out. "A good calf may cost seventy-five pesos."

Slim waved that objection away. "I think we could afford to pay up to a hundred. Unless, of course, someone has an objection." He waited for someone to speak and then added, "Carried. As treasurer of this company, I am authorized to expend one hundred pesos for a suitable present for our friends in La Gloria."

"And now," Bill said standing up, "it must be six o'clock."

"We don't need watches with you around, Bill," Diego said.

They chose a table in the dining room in the corner farthest from the door, so that they could see everybody in the room. But no one they recognized made an appearance. They ate leisurely, since no one was in any hurry to get back to the rooms.

There seemed to be an unmentioned desire to pass as much of the necessary waiting time as possible in a place where there were lots of people. But by half-past seven they could find no further excuse for dawdling there.

They wandered out to the lobby, stopped at the desk and made a great show of looking at the maps posted

there, and then spent some time discussing their route. Even so, it was scarcely eight o'clock when they got upstairs again.

Bill bustled around both rooms, turning on all the lights. That completed, he adjusted the Venetian blinds on the windows so that no one could look through.

"Maybe you'd better lock the doors," Slim suggested with a smile.

"Yeah. And put the furniture up against them," Roger added. "If you're going to make a fortress out of this place, do it right. What's the matter with you anyway?"

"Well," Bill said defensively, "I feel sort of funny. Like waiting for an explosion, but not knowing just when it will happen. I suppose *you're* not even thinking about what Smith's doing right now."

Diego nodded. "It's probably stupid, but I feel the same way, Bill."

Slim grinned. "All right. Let's all admit we're a little nervous. It's difficult to sit up here knowing what's supposed to be going on down at the car tonight, and not be on edge." He lifted one of the slats of the Venetian blinds and peered out. "It's getting dark. I should think Smith would get the money as fast as he could and take off."

"Eight-fifteen," Roger said.

"And all's well," Slim added.

"We hope." And with that contribution to the conversation Bill picked up a magazine and began to flip the pages aimlessly.

Time dragged slowly by.

"Half-past eight," Roger announced in a flat tone.

Diego sat down at the desk. "I think I'll write a letter while I'm waiting."

Bill dropped the magazine on the bed. "That's a good idea! We haven't written to Pop since that night in Laredo. We can send it air mail from here tomorrow." Suddenly full of energy, he walked through the bathroom into the adjoining bedroom to use the desk there.

"Leave me some room on the page," Roger called, and picked up the magazine Bill had discarded.

At nine o'clock Bill came back, announcing that he had finished. Roger went in to add his own message.

Slim looked at his watch. And just then there came a knock on the door. They all looked at each other. Again there came that knock.

Roger's head was thrust through the door from the other room. "What's that?"

Slim shrugged. "Who is it?" he called.

"Señor Warner?" The voice was low but penetrating. "I am Juan."

Swiftly Slim crossed the room and opened the door. The attendant at the gas station, his hat in his hand, stood outside. "Come in." Slim stepped back to let Juan enter, and closed the door behind him. "Yes? I hope there hasn't been any trouble."

Roger had come into the room, and the three boys stood close together, their nerves taut. Would Santos have risked sending a messenger unless something had gone wrong?

The Mexican smiled. "There is no trouble, señor. But I am afraid that Smith did not limit his—his stealing, shall we say?—to the money. It appears he took other things as well."

"But he *did* take the money?" Roger broke in.

"Oh, *si*. Yes."

"Well, *that's* good. But—"

Slim looked puzzled. "What other things? There wasn't much there except some slickers and a thermos bottle."

"The glove compartment—it has been forced open. I discovered it when I inspected to see if all was well. I would like for you to look at it, please. If Smith stole something of yours, Señor Santos would wish to know."

"Well, it can't be anything very important, but—O. K. I'll run down with you." Slim turned to Roger. "Lock the door. I'll be right back."

Slim followed the Mexican out into the corridor and Roger shut and locked the door behind them.

"Well, that's that," Bill said. "It's all over now." He threw himself on the bed. "It's funny, isn't it—sort of—what do they call it? An anticlimax?"

But Roger wasn't listening. Something was tapping away at his brain. An idea, or rather a feeling, that something was wrong someplace. He shook his head as if to clear it, but the disturbing thought persisted that something—*something*—

"What's the matter, Roger?" Diego asked.

"I don't know really. I can't think what it is, but I feel as if we'd missed something, or as if something were out of line."

"Now who's seeing things?" Bill chortled. "Why don't you relax?"

Roger shrugged helplessly. "Yeah. I guess you're right. I'll finish addressing that envelope. Maybe I can . . ." His voice trailed off as he wandered into the other room.

He had just licked the envelope flap when there was another knock on the door. Roger was back before either Bill or Diego could make a move.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Juan, Señor. Only Juan."

"It's his voice, all right," Bill whispered.

"Sure it is." Roger was unaccountably annoyed to discover an echo of his own strange nervousness in Bill. He unlocked the door and stepped back to admit the Mexican a second time.

"Señor Warner wishes you to come down to the car," Juan said. "He is making a list of articles which were stolen from the glove compartment. He wishes you to help, please."

"Oh, sure," Bill said. The idea of action clearly appealed to him. "Come on, Rog."

But Roger didn't move. He was feeling as stunned as if someone had suddenly poured a bucket of ice water over him. He knew now what had been bothering him.

He knew now that they had been tricked.

Juan had said that the glove compartment had been *forced open*. But that couldn't have been the truth, because *it hadn't been locked*. Slim locked it only when the gun was there, and the gun wasn't there now. It was lying on the top of Slim's open bag.

The gun! Of course—that was the only way! He could grab it and turn it on Juan.

But that was no good. He didn't know how to release the safety catch, and while he was fumbling. . . . No. That wouldn't work.

But he couldn't just stand there doing nothing. That alone would give him away. Ideas flashed through his mind like comets, only to be discarded just as quickly. And then he had it. It was the sight of his windbreaker lying across his bed that did it. Slim's bag lay on the floor between the two beds.

"Come on, Rog," Bill was saying, already at the door.

"O. K. But get your windbreakers," Roger said firmly to his brother and Diego. "It's chilly outside."

As he walked toward his own he glanced around just enough to see that the Mexican wasn't keeping a close watch. Then he managed to let his windbreaker fall out of his hands and across Slim's bag. When he picked it up again, the gun was enveloped in its folds.

Keeping his back to the room, he swiftly shoved the gun under his belt, slipped into the windbreaker and zipped it up the front. He could feel the bulk of the weapon under his right arm, but the loosely fitting garment effectively hid it.

He was about to turn around to face the man at the door when he caught sight of the telephone standing on the small bedside table. Of course he couldn't make a call from here. But maybe if he could get into the adjoining room—Bill and Diego were in there now, but they didn't know what he knew.

"Hey!" he called. "What's taking so long?" He walked toward the connecting door. If he could just get through without the man suspecting anything—

But before he had taken three steps, Bill and Diego appeared.

"O. K.," Bill said. "We're ready."

"Good." The Mexican reached for the doorknob.

"Wait a minute." Roger walked back toward the table. "I'd better get some paper if we're going to make lists."

"There is enough," Juan said. "Señor Warner says he has paper."

Roger ignored him and noisily slid open the table drawer. Shielding his movements with his body he

scrambled in the drawer with one hand, while the other carefully lifted the phone out of its cradle. He balanced it precariously and slid the drawer closed. "O. K. Let's go."

Roger walked as slowly as possible down the long corridor. Any moment now, the night clerk should be coming to see what was wrong with the phone in their room—to see why the signal light on the switchboard kept blinking, and why no one answered.

But no one appeared by the time they reached the stairs. Roger wasn't surprised that they went down through the rear of the hotel, directly to the parking lot. He had guessed that they would avoid the lobby. Maybe now the clerk was coming. But back here he wouldn't know—could never signal to him.

They walked across the dark lot to the car, and as each step took them farther from the hotel, the trapped feeling settled down on Roger more firmly. He threw one more backward glance at the building as they reached the car. There was no indication of any undue activity.—no rushing figure searching for guests who had suddenly disappeared.

Slim was seated behind the wheel of the car. "Get in, boys," he said shortly.

"Yes," said a voice from the dark rear of the car. "Get in." A dim figure moved forward far enough to show them the gun he was pointing at the back of Slim's head. It was Smith. Roger had known it would be.

"Two in the front, and one in the back with me," Smith ordered.

"Hey!" Bill stopped short. "What goes on here?"

"Mr. Smith!" Diego gasped.

Before any more could be said, Slim spoke. "Get in, boys," he repeated. "Mr. Smith seems to think it necessary that we accompany him on a little trip. I don't understand it—any part of it—but we're in no position to argue the matter."

The slight emphasis Slim had put on those four words told Roger all he needed to know: Slim was playing dumb. Roger watched Bill carefully in case he should try to ask more questions, but Bill seemed too flabbergasted to do any talking at all. Roger wasn't worried about Diego speaking out of turn. He usually was the quietest of them all, and he was also sharp enough to have understood the implied command in Slim's voice.

Roger got into the front seat next to Slim and Bill got in beside him. Diego crawled into the back seat with Smith.

"Get their luggage," Smith said.

Juan vanished and Roger's spirits soared again. Certainly by now the clerk must be investigating. He might even come across the man in the room and take him for a thief. Or . . .

And then the Mexican reappeared, still calm and unruffled. He dumped the bags in the back of the car. "No weapons," he said briefly. "You have searched him?"

"Of course," Smith replied. "He has nothing. You may go now."

Juan disappeared into the dark.

Roger had felt Slim stiffen when Juan reported there had been no weapons in the room. Very carefully, he nudged the detective. And after a few seconds there was an almost imperceptible nudge from Slim in return. Roger knew his message had been received and understood. Even if they were to get no help from his telephone

trick, he thought, at least they had a gun. And Slim knew it now.

"All right. Get started, Warner," Smith said. "I'll direct you. And believe me, it would be disastrous for you to attempt some trick."



CHAPTER TWELVE

WHAT ROGER WAS TO REMEMBER most vividly about that grimly silent ride through the night was not the fright he felt; it was not even the terrifying menace of Juan, the betrayer, or the devastating realization that Santos must have double-crossed them, too. What was most indelibly printed on his brain afterward was the hopeless feeling that overpowered him because he couldn't speak to Slim.

Always, in the past, he and Bill and Slim had talked things over—discussed the pros and cons of a situation, however desperate it was, and arrived thereby at some course of action. Now, with Slim's implied demand for silence, he and the others were forced to sit quietly as

the car took them farther and farther away from the hotel and any chance of aid.

What was Slim thinking? Did he have a plan? Did he believe they were helplessly trapped? Hadn't he realized Roger had the gun, or did he think they were beyond its help?

And what was going through the minds of Bill and Diego, Roger could only guess, too. From the rigidity of Bill's body beside him he knew his brother was literally scared stiff. He nudged him lightly and glanced around. In the dim glow of the light from the instrument panel, Bill caught the wink. His face twitched slightly, as if he had tried to wink back but couldn't make his muscles respond.

Very carefully Roger found Bill's hand and moved it up to the hard bulge that the gun made. Bill got it. His eyes opened wide and then one of them closed slowly. After that his body relaxed slightly.

Roger breathed a little easier. At least now Bill would be in better shape to face whatever was coming.

But there wasn't anything he could do to ease Diego's mind at all.

They had gone about four miles along the road toward San Luis Potosí when the first words were spoken.

"Slow up, Warner." Smith leaned forward. "We take a turn to the left around here someplace."

Slim let the car drop from thirty to fifteen miles an hour and they continued at that rate for about half a mile.

"Stop here," Smith said then. He opened the rear door and nudged Diego. "Get out."

A moment later the slight figure of Diego stood on

the road alongside the car. The other two boys watched wide eyed. What was going to happen now?

Smith got out, too. "I have to look for the road," he explained. "But don't try anything—not if you'd like to keep your friend here safe and sound."

Slim didn't answer and they watched the man walk ahead down the road, preceded by Diego, with the gun pressed against his back. When they were several feet away, Slim began to speak in an almost inaudible whisper.

"Don't talk. And keep that gun until we see what's going to happen. I might be searched again. I couldn't use it now anyway because he'd hurt somebody before I could stop him. If they try to separate us when we get wherever we're going, you'll have to manage to get it to me somehow."

"But suppose I can't?"

"Then it'll be up to you to decide when and if to use it." Smith had stopped some distance up the road and was using a small flashlight to study the terrain. "Quick. Take it out. I'll show you how to release the safety catch."

Roger zipped open his jacket and Slim demonstrated the operation. Roger coughed to cover the slight click, and his hands were trembling. Smith was coming back. He hid the weapon again about ten seconds before Diego crawled into the car.

"O. K.," Smith said, after he had climbed in himself. "Go forward about a hundred feet, and turn left there across the shallow ditch and onto the field."

Slim drove slowly until he was off the road and rolling over a lane similar to the one that had taken them to La Gloria. The dry powdered earth cushioned the wheels

and the car traveled with a muffled sound as if it were crossing a thick carpet. Roger, his eyes on the speedometer, watched the miles go by and tried to memorize the turns, but it was impossible because the faint little track wound and twisted endlessly.

They drove a dozen miles before Smith told Slim to slow down again. Slim hadn't been driving fast, but now he cut their speed to a crawl.

"Take the left fork," Smith ordered as a branch road appeared. "And take it easy along here. This isn't a highway."

Slim nodded. The instruction had scarcely been necessary. They began to climb almost immediately, and the character of the road changed from soft earth to rock. The turns became more numerous and sharper, and Slim had to keep the car in second most of the time.

The blackness around them was complete: There must have been stars in the sky because it was a beautifully clear night, but they did nothing to break the darkness that lay like a blanket around them, except for the glow of the headlights straight ahead.

It was Smith who finally broke the silence again. "Very quiet, aren't you?"

Slim shrugged. "No sense in talking," he said. "I asked you what this was all about and you refused to say. We'll get our explanation in good time, no doubt. In fact, Smith, I'd think up a good story if I were you. You're going to have a lot of explaining to do."

"Look," Smith said with a laugh, "you're taking this too seriously."

"Kidnaping," Slim told him in a level voice, "is generally considered a pretty serious offense."

"Technically, I suppose this is kidnaping." Smith was

keeping his own voice friendly, and somehow it was more frightening than if he had shouted at them, or snarled menacingly. "But actually you're just being taken out of circulation for a few days until we get something done. Then you'll be brought back to the highway none the worse for your experience."

Slim made no answer that time. The road became even worse than it had been, and he shifted back into low speed. The engine labored, and the rear wheels spun wildly to get some traction among loose stones. The speedometer dropped to five miles an hour and then to three, and the temperature indicator climbed to the boiling point even though the air was chill.

"I'll have to stop and let the motor cool down," Slim said at last.

"Don't stop here," Smith directed. "You'll never get started again. The top is only a few hundred feet away."

They made it finally, and Slim shut the motor off. For a few minutes they could hear the noisy gurgling of the water in the radiator, but it subsided slowly, and the stillness closed in on them again.

Once more it was Smith who started the conversation. "This secrecy I'm maintaining is for your own good, to be quite frank with you. The less you know about what's going on, the better off you'll be. And the quicker you'll be released." Still keeping his gun trained on the back of Slim's head, he fished around in his pocket with a free hand and got out a cigarette. "It's not healthy to know too much about some things."

Roger caught his breath. He hadn't been taken in by Smith's effort to make light of the situation, but somehow he had had at least a hope that they would be released after the counterfeit money had been distributed. Now, at

Smith's last words, he knew it wouldn't work out that way. They *already* knew too much to be allowed to go free. Ever. And Smith knew it! Juan and Santos must have told him exactly how much Slim knew about the vicious plan.

But this last realization started another whole train of frantic questions in his mind. Had Santos known exactly what he was doing when he lied to them so elaborately? And so convincingly? If the money had been all he'd wanted, he could have gotten that from them that night in La Gloria—or at any of several other times. But the gang apparently needed more than the money—they needed safety. And that they could get only if Slim and the boys could never talk.

Roger shivered and grew hot at the same time. He felt the perspiration break out on his forehead, and the palms of his hands grew clammy. Slim gave no sign that he understood the situation that Smith's words had implied, as he reached forward and started the motor once more.

That last hill had been the crest, evidently, for beyond it they began a gradual descent that finally brought them out to another flat plain. The headlights reached a long way forward now, and showed that they were going through sugar-cane fields. The speedometer registered another seven miles before they saw a light ahead.

"That's where we're going," Smith said, suddenly. "When you reach the hacienda follow the road right around the wall to the far side where the gate is."

They reached the wall in a few minutes, and as Slim skirted it they could see that, once inside, there would be no chance of escaping—at least not by climbing over the wall. It was almost twenty feet high, and the broken bottles that had been set in the cement on top of it

winked brilliantly like jewels in the glare of the headlights.

Slim pulled up in front of a pair of heavy timber doors nearly as high as the wall itself. A single electric bulb gleamed down on them from the top of the arch in which they were set, casting a small circle of light around the gateway.

"Blow your horn."

The sound beat against the wall and echoed back, and for a minute there was a dead silence. Then one of the doors swung sharply open, outwards, and a Mexican carrying a rifle appeared.

Smith spoke to him in Spanish. The Mexican came over to the car and flashed a light inside. When he was satisfied as to Smith's identity he walked back to the doors and swung them both wide. Just then the inner courtyard beyond sprang into brilliance as powerful lights flashed on.

When Slim had driven inside they could hear the doors being shut and barred behind them.

"Pull over to that building," Smith said, indicating the largest of half a dozen structures in the five-acre enclosure.

Slim drove very slowly, giving the boys an opportunity to get a quick look around. The building they were approaching was undoubtedly the main house. It was stone—like the other buildings—and two stories high.

"Stop here."

Slim braked the car in front of a huge doorway directly in the center of the building.

Smith got out. "O. K. Take your bags and follow me."

They went through the doorway, past another armed guard, and into a tremendous room that seemed to occupy most of the ground floor of the house. It was the full two

stories high, and the ceiling was almost out of sight in the upper dimness. The walls were cement or stone and there were doors leading off into other rooms. About fifteen feet above them, a balcony ran around the walls, and a stairway in the far corner led up to it.

When their eyes grew accustomed to the dimness after the brilliant lighting outside, they could see that there were doors leading off the balcony to the rooms on that level. Actually, the big downstairs chamber was more like a courtyard than a room, even to the floor which was paved with great flat stones cemented in place. A fireplace at one end was almost large enough to drive a car into, and the huge blaze in it gave off more light than the few small electric lamps.

That was all they had a chance to see as Smith gestured them ahead of him toward the stairway that led to the balcony. When he reached it he stopped and called upstairs.

A voice answered him from the balcony and then Smith directed them on up. They went halfway around the balcony before he finally halted them before an open door—one of four on that side of the building.

A short, swarthy man came out. He nodded to Smith, and the latter motioned them forward into the room.

"I think you'll be comfortable here." He indicated two immense beds. "The windows are about twenty feet from the ground so I wouldn't try to jump. In any case, of course, you'd still have to go over the wall. But I'm sure it's unnecessary to point out such elementary facts. You will, as I said, be leaving here soon and without any inconvenience to yourselves."

He walked to the door, and the swarthy man, who had been waiting there, handed Smith a key. Like everything

else in the house it was about four times normal size. Smith fitted it into the lock from the outside, glanced once more around the room, and smiled.

"Good night." He closed the door behind him and they could hear the lock rattle as the great key turned in it.

Bill set his bag down with a little thud, as if it had become too heavy to hold. "Now what?" There was a definite quaver in his voice.

"Now we think," Roger said, as briskly as he could.

Slim motioned them all close, and when they were gathered in a tight circle around him, he whispered. "Keep your voices down. We don't know if we can be overheard." Then he stretched and said aloud. "I think we ought to get some sleep. We can try to figure this out in the morning, if somebody hasn't explained it all to us by then. In the meantime, as our host said, I think we can be comfortable here."

"Yeah," Roger said. "And I'm about dead." A moment later he wished he had used another word, but it was too late.

"Where's that door go to?" Slim said quickly, as if he, too, regretted Roger's unhappy choice.

Diego walked over and opened it. "It's a bathroom." He grinned at Bill, and Roger could guess what an effort it must have cost. "But there's no shower—just a tub."

"I had a shower in Hidalgo," Bill said, and he managed a faint answering grin in return.

"O. K." Slim was suddenly brusque. "Get going. It's way past your bedtime." He took off his own jacket and draped it over the doorknob, as Bill obediently went in to wash. "Blocks the keyhole anyway," he whispered, close to Roger's ear. "I don't see how there could be peep

holes in these stone walls, but there might be some kind of mike."

Roger nodded, "Hurry up, Bill," he called. He walked to the window and looked down. Their room was at one end of the house, and Roger couldn't see the front gate and their car. But he could see tracks in the hard-packed dirt leading to a smaller building about a hundred feet away.

As he studied the well-lighted but deserted yard, he heard a motor start, and recognized the familiar sound of Slim's car immediately.

"Our car," he whispered to Slim and Diego.

As they watched, the car was driven around the corner of the house and into their range of vision. It proceeded along the tracks toward the building Roger had first noticed. The armed Mexican who had admitted them at the gates got out, opened the double doors of the building, and then drove the car through. A moment later the doors were closed from the inside.

They waited for him to reappear, but he didn't. And after a couple of minutes the lights went out in the yard.

"Maybe he sleeps in that building," Slim murmured. "That's good to know."

"I like knowing where the car is, too," Roger said.

"O. K." Bill came out with his hands outstretched and his eyes closed. "There're no towels in here. Get mine out of my bag, please."

Roger handed him a towel. "We'll complain about the service to the manager tomorrow." He motioned to Diego. "You're next."

While Bill was still occupied, Roger said softly to Slim, "Smith knows we're onto the whole scheme."

Slim nodded. "But keep it quiet." He glanced significantly at Bill.

"And we believed Santos," Roger said. "What a laugh."

Slim wrinkled his brow. "He had enough dope to convince anybody. I still don't—" He suddenly gave Roger a push, and said aloud, "Go on. Diego's finished."

Fifteen minutes later Slim turned off the light and sat on the edge of his bed. Bill and Diego crept over to join him and Roger there.

"Keep your voices down," Slim reminded them. "And I mean down." He waited a moment. "O. K. We're in a spot. But it's not so bad. I'm sure they'll let us go, after they're convinced we can't interfere with their plans."

Roger smiled a little in the darkness at Slim's attempt to lighten the seriousness of their situation for the sake of the younger boys. But his smile disappeared when Bill answered.

"Why don't you stop treating me like a baby?" he muttered. "I know we're in a spot, and I can figure out that if Santos and Juan crossed us up, Smith knows we already have enough information to get them in trouble." He added after a second or two: "Sure, I'm scared, but no more than Roger."

There was a hint of laughter in Slim's whispered answer. "O. K. You win. My most humble apologies. We'll put all our cards on the table and play the game four handed from now on."

"What happened when you went down with Juan?" Diego asked suddenly.

"That's a good place to begin," Slim agreed. "What happened was that I walked right into Smith and his gun. He'd already taken the money out of the car and had packed it in a canvas bag he had. He made me get in

and then sent Juan back for you three. I was afraid to start anything for fear they'd get tough with you kids. This way, together, we still have a good chance—especially since Roger had the brilliant idea of bringing the gun along.”

“The gun!” Diego’s whisper rose.

“Ssh!” Bill said. “What made you take it, Rog?”

“That’s something I’d like to know, too,” Slim added. “Did Juan let you know what the situation really was?”

“He just told us you wanted us to come down,” Bill remembered.

“He said the glove compartment had been forced open, and I knew it hadn’t been locked,” Roger explained. In spite of everything, he still felt a sense of pride over that piece of deduction.

“Nice going,” Slim said. “If I’d had the sense to catch that we might not have been fooled.”

“Yeah. Pretty smart,” Bill murmured admiringly.

“Oh, well—” Roger was glad it was dark. He was afraid he was looking a little red after Slim’s praise.

And then he remembered what he had done with the telephone, and quickly told Slim and the boys about it. “Not that it did any good,” he concluded.

“Wait a minute,” Slim interrupted. “This may be our out. Even if the clerk didn’t notice the light or the buzzer on the switchboard until after we had gone—he was taking care of the desk, too—he must have noticed it sometime. He’d plug in our connection and ask what we wanted, wouldn’t he?”

“I guess so,” Roger said.

“And if he couldn’t get any answer, he’d probably figure we’d let the phone fall out of the cradle.”

"So he'd forget about it," Diego said.

"No. It would be too annoying—that steady buzzing all night," Slim continued. "He'd finally come up and get us to put the phone back where it belongs. But we wouldn't be there—and neither would our baggage."

"So he'd think we ducked out to avoid paying our bill, huh?" Bill's voice was rising a little in his excitement.

"Keep it down," Slim said. "Right. And if he thought that, he'd call the police to stop us."

"Sure," Diego said. "But the police probably already know about the whole thing. They're in this with Santos."

"That's right," Roger said, his own brief excitement dying down.

"It's right if Santos really double-crossed us," Slim agreed. "But I'm not sure of that yet. He *did* have a letter from my boss, and I don't see how he could have had that unless he were all right."

"But how else would Smith have known about the plan?" Bill asked. "Santos and Juan must both have been—"

He stopped abruptly. The yard lights had just been turned on.

They all went to the window to look out.

"I can't see a thing," Bill said.

"Quiet!" Slim turned his head to listen to the sounds that were reaching them through the open window.

They heard the creak of the big gates opening and then the sound of a car coming into the yard. A moment later a door slammed, the motor grew louder, and the car came into view—heading for the same building into which Slim's had been driven. It stopped before it and Smith got out. He opened the doors and drove inside.

A moment later he reappeared, closing the doors behind him, and returned to the big house. Then the lights went out in the yard.

Slim crossed the room as rapidly as he could in the dark and put his ear against the heavy door. "I hear voices," he said to the boys who had followed him, "but I can't make out what they're saying."

"If we could only get the door open," Roger said.

"Maybe we can." Slim groped toward the doorknob on which his jacket hung. When he returned he had a tiny flashlight the size of a fountain pen, and his wallet. "Here," he said to Roger. "Hold the light."

Roger kept the tiny beam pointed at the wallet while Slim opened it and took out a thin piece of springy steel with a hook at one end. "Don't shine the light directly into the keyhole," he directed, "but give me enough to work by."

He inserted the steel implement into the keyhole and began to turn it back and forth very gently. After a minute it seemed to catch on something.

Holding the steel tool steady, Slim looked up. "There may be a guard right outside," he breathed, "so give me the gun just in case. But I think it's worth taking a chance to get some information."

Roger went to the bed and took the gun out from under the pillow. Slim thumbed the safety off, and motioned to the boys to stand back away from the door. "Keep the light off," he cautioned.

There was a faint click in the darkness, and then silence. "Well," Slim whispered, "here goes."

They couldn't hear the knob being turned, but suddenly faint light from the big room below came in through a crack. The crack widened as Slim pulled the

door slowly inwards. When it was an inch wide, Slim stopped and applied his eye to it.

Apparently there was no sign of a guard outside, because after a moment he opened the door about halfway. The voices below were clearer now, and the boys could identify one of them as Smith's. The other they had never heard before. Roger assumed it must belong to the man—or one of the men—who had just arrived in the car Smith had put away. And if Smith were doing his errands, he must be important—might even be very important indeed. Roger strained his ears to listen.

Suddenly the strange voice was raised enough for them to catch the words.

"Smith," it said, "you're a fool. By bringing these American meddlers here you've jeopardized everything we've spent years building up."

"But, General—"

"Don't call me 'General.' " There was quiet fury in the voice. "How many times have I told you that?"

"But surely it's safe here."

"It's never safe. It won't be safe until we have fully established ourselves. Remember that. And now go on."

Slim dropped to the floor and began to edge out through the doorway, using his elbows and knees to propel himself forward like a caterpillar. The boys crowded up to take his place at the opening, and watched him work his way across the balcony until he could look down through the railings. At that distance he was almost invisible to them, and Roger knew he could not possibly be seen from below, but just the same he wished he'd come back.

"I had to bring them," Smith was saying. "They knew too much about me—they *knew* the money was there,



He could look down through the railing.

and they were waiting for me to take it. Juan told me everything—their whole plan. We were able to take care of the man set to follow me, but the Americans we had to bring here. There was nothing else to do. Had we left them there, they would have gone directly to Santos in the morning. I had to protect myself.”

Roger’s heart gave a leap. So Santos was all right after all. Then perhaps—But he concentrated on what they were saying down there.

“If you thought less of your own miserable neck and more of the cause, we would all be better off,” the stranger was saying coldly. “What damage could they do, once they had taken the money? Santos already knows about you—but what *proof* would he have? But now—these fool Americans are really dangerous. They have seen this place. And all because of your stupidity!”

Smith’s voice was thin with fear. “You give me very little credit—I who have planned so much of our campaign.”

“Oh! So you have safeguarded us in some way. I see. I suppose you have persuaded the Americans to promise that they will never tell where they have been! Fool! Idiot!”

“They will not be able to tell,” Smith said triumphantly. “They will suffer an accident—an unfortunately fatal accident—when they leave this place. And if a sum of counterfeit money is found in their baggage afterward—won’t that draw the attention of the police away from us entirely and transfer it to them? Why, no one will ever listen to Santos and his foolish suspicions again. You see?”

“Mmm. Perhaps. Yes—perhaps you are right after all.” He paused and in the silence the boys shivered and drew

closer together. A moment before they had been cheered by the information about Santos. But now—

“And you think this Santos will also be silenced?” the leader went on.

“Perhaps not immediately,” Smith admitted. “He will continue his search—he may even come here. But what evidence will he find? As you say, what can he do with mere suspicions?” Smith was beginning to sound more expansive now. “Why, even if he manages eventually to prove to the authorities that Warner and those boys are innocent, it will be too late. We will have taken care that another story has been spread among the people, and they will believe ours. It will help our cause. So this little accident I have planned will serve several purposes.”

There was a long silence, and while it lasted the boys could not even think. They merely stood, rigid, as if they had all been numbed by some blow that left them upright but without feeling or life.

“And how will you arrange this accident?” There was a faint note of anticipation and pleasure in the words.

Smith laughed, relief obvious in the sound. He had convinced his leader. Apparently the matter of disposing of Slim and the boys was a lesser, more inconsequential problem. “It will be simple. Ricardo will drive them back toward Hidalgo early in the morning. When he is a good distance from here, but still in the hills, he will take care of it. A quick twist of the wheel is enough, on one of those sharp turns. Ricardo can jump clear and the car will go over. The fall of several hundred feet should effectively destroy their ability to tell of their experience here.” He chuckled, and then added briskly, “It should all be over in an instant.”

“And if they somehow prevent Ricardo from carrying

out this plan? If they suspect? From what you report, this Warner is no fool." The strange voice was sharp again.

But this time Smith did not become frightened. "They won't be able to prevent him. I have, of course, planned for that possibility. You see—"

As the quarrel had subsided, the voices had subsided, too, and grown more difficult to hear. Now Smith's suddenly died away to an undecipherable whisper.

For a long agonizing moment, the boys could hear nothing. Finally they realized that Slim, too, could apparently no longer make out the conversation. He was edging back toward the door. They stepped aside to make room for him.

When he was inside he twisted the lock into place again, and sighed.

Roger pressed the button on the tiny flashlight. Their faces all looked pale in its tiny glow.

Slim was staring down ruefully at the gun he still held in his hand.

"It would have been easy," he whispered. "I was almost tempted for a moment. But I know Santos wants those men alive. And as for it helping us any—for all we know there are dozens of men in this place. It would have been foolish to attempt anything with the little information we have. As a last resort, maybe, but—" He tucked the gun into his belt, and walked over to sit down on the bed.

The boys joined him.

"What do you think Smith was going to say right there at the end?" Roger asked. "Did you hear him? When he said we wouldn't be able to prevent Ricardo—whoever he is—from—from—" He couldn't frame the

words to conclude his thought, but it wasn't necessary. He knew all of them had mental pictures as vivid as his—of Slim's mangled car at the foot of a cliff, and four bodies crushed in the wreckage.

"Maybe they just meant we wouldn't know what was going on, and would be so glad to be getting away we wouldn't suspect anything," Bill offered.

"No. I think they have in mind something more definite than that," Slim said slowly. "Perhaps they plan to drug us—put something in our food at breakfast."

"Well, we could—we could just not eat it," Bill said. And even in their desperate plight they all grinned faintly at the note of sacrifice in his voice.

"We could do that if they didn't wait to watch us eat," Slim agreed. "We could just get rid of it in there—" he nodded toward the bathroom—"if they sent us trays. Then they wouldn't suspect we'd guessed. But if they stand over us, it would be too risky to take the chance. They might decide, then, simply to hurry things up."

"Santos is the one that had better hurry up," Bill said in a small voice, after the long silence that followed Slim's words. "D'you think he'll find us somehow, Slim?"

Before Slim could answer, the lights in the courtyard flashed on again, and they all rushed toward the square of brilliance that blazed in their window.

Another car was driving into the courtyard, and a moment later loud voices were raised in the room below. After an instant's hesitation Slim crossed decisively to the door, and worked at the lock again. It seemed an eternity before the tiny instrument caught this time, and almost the moment the door opened Slim shut it again swiftly.

"Get into bed," he ordered.

As they moved hastily across the room they could all hear footsteps ascending the stairs.

But the steps continued past their door and then they heard, dimly, the rattle of another lock and the sound of a door opening. It closed immediately afterward, the lock rattled again, and once more steps passed their door.

Below them the voices became louder. Slim worked over the lock for another moment and then edged the door open.

"You are a bigger fool than Smith!" The leader was saying. "Why did you bring him here?"

"I did not bring him," a voice answered.

Slim and the boys gasped. This was Juan speaking.

"He brought me," Juan continued. "He was at the hotel less than an hour after you left. He sent out many policemen, in pairs, to cover all the small roads, and he told me to accompany him. He saw the tracks where the car had turned off the highway. He is a smart one, that Santos."

Slim closed the door and leaned against it. Unspoken among them was the single and frightening thought; Santos had come, but Santos, too, had been imprisoned. They could expect no help now from that quarter.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SECONDS WENT BY as they stood there in the darkness, all of them trying to adjust their minds to this new turn of events. Through the closed door the muted voices from downstairs filtered through.

"That was our last chance," Bill whispered weakly.

"No," Slim corrected. He, too, spoke in a whisper, but he seemed more assured than he had up to now. "Getting Santos was their mistake."

"But we were depending on him to . . ."

"No time for speculation now," Slim interrupted. "We've got to move—and fast. Bringing Santos here was a mistake because it gives our side another man and—unless I'm way off—he's a good one to have. Now listen.

Santos is in a room near us—right next door if my judgment is correct. If I can open our door, I can probably open his.”

“O. K., Slim.” Roger answered, making himself adopt Slim’s crisp manner. “I’ll listen to the conversation while you’re gone.”

“Now, you’re talking,” Slim edged the door open and peered out. “Looks clear. Remember, don’t take any chances, and keep down low. We don’t have to see anything—just listen.”

He dropped to the floor again and wriggled out of the room and down the balcony toward the left. Roger imitated him and inched forward until he was near the railing where the conversation was clearly audible. But a moment later he was squirming back.

“You’ll have to go, Diego. They’re talking Spanish.”

Diego took up a position on the balcony floor near the rail while Roger and Bill stood in the dark doorway. There was no sound to indicate either the success or failure of Slim’s mission, but below them the three-cornered discussion went on explosively, with most of the talking being done by the leader. Smith cut in several times, and even Juan made some attempt to placate his boss, but it was evident that his position in the organization was very minor, and that neither Smith nor the general paid much attention to him. It occurred to Roger that no one would respect the judgment of a man who could so easily be persuaded to betray a man who trusted him, as Juan had betrayed Santos.

Smith finally managed to speak for several minutes without being interrupted, and when he finished there was a long silence before the leader spoke again. He sounded less sarcastic than before, and Roger knew in-

instinctively that Smith must have suggested an acceptable solution for the problem brought about by Santos' ill-timed appearance.

Smith laughed then, and added another sentence which evoked a "*Bueno!*" from the leader.

"Good," Roger translated automatically.

"For them," Bill added. "But not for us."

Diego was wriggling back into the room, but before he was entirely inside Slim appeared, followed by Santos. Slim closed the door quietly and locked it. "Come away from the door," he whispered.

"Shh," Santos cautioned. "Steps on the balcony."

"Get away from the door—quick."

As if prodded by spurs, the boys jumped for the far wall of the room. There was a faint click from where Slim was standing in front of the door. He had unlocked the safety on his gun.

Outside on the balcony the steps stopped. Someone tried their knob, and they all held their breath in terror. Then the steps continued down the hall. A moment later they returned, passed their door again, and faded out in the direction of the stairway.

Santos chuckled. "It is good, Warner, that you locked my door."

"O. K." Slim was terse. "We don't have too much time so we'd better get organized. Want to tell us what happened, Santos?"

"That," the Mexican answered, "I will make very brief. One does not like to dwell upon his own stupidity. You already know that Juan betrayed us. He must have told Smith that your car was being watched because my man was effectively knocked out. They have taken him to

the hospital—his skull fractured. They tell me that he will perhaps be all right—after a long time.”

“How did you find out we’d gone?” Slim asked. “The telephone?”

“So?” Santos sounded surprised. “You know about it? It was not merely a lucky accident that the buzzer continued to ring?”

“Roger thought of it—just as he thought of bringing the gun.” Slim quickly told Santos what had happened to them and then waited for Santos to go on.

“If I could see you in the dark,” Santos said, “I would like to shake your hand, Roger. But it will wait. Now, to continue. The hotel clerk called the Hidalgo police and they called me. I was at the hotel not more than half an hour after you were kidnaped, I believe. We found poor Anselmo and sent him off, and then I checked my road guards by radio. You had not passed any of them on the highway so I knew you must have been taken away on one of the small trails.” Santos stopped a moment to light a cigarette.

“The hotel clerk thought he had seen a car pass the front of the hotel going toward San Luis Potosí,” he continued, “so I decided to check in that direction myself. There is only one road you could have taken without running into my guards.” He laughed shortly. “To this point I was behaving intelligently, but then I made my big mistake—I took Juan with me.”

The boys could imagine him shrugging in the darkness.

“It was not difficult to follow you even at the fork in the road because I could see your tire tracks. When they led to this hacienda I decided to go in boldly. After all, I had Juan with me, did I not?”

"Then, I suppose, Juan pulled a gun on you," Slim said.

"As soon as we were inside the gates. And from then on you know the story." Santos dropped the cigarette on the floor and stepped on it. "Now we must get out—or at least get to my car so that I can use the radio to call for help."

"Wait a minute," Slim said. "Let's hear what the boys learned while you and I were occupied."

"They were talking in Spanish," Roger said, "so Diego had to do the job."

"They're going to use the same idea they had before—the accident, I mean—except that now we'll have Santos in the car with us," Diego reported. "Juan will follow us in Santos' car, and after we go off the cliff, he'll go home for help. He'll say that Santos arrested us and was taking us back to Hidalgo when the accident happened. And there'll be no one to say he was wrong."

"Really a fine plan," Santos said admiringly. "It is a shame that we must spoil it. But I am afraid we must."

"We know where the car is," Bill said.

"Good. Now then, how can we get out?"

"Only through the door," Slim said. He looked at the dial on his watch. "It's almost three, so we should have an hour or so to work. If we can get inside the garage we might be able to get help before they discover our absence."

"I do not know," Santos said, "if we can get help so quickly. Even if I succeed in making contact immediately, it will take them some time to relay the information to Hidalgo, and it will take them more than an hour to reach the hacienda."

"That's a chance we have to take," Slim said. "If the garage is built like this house, we might be able to hold it for a while."

"Don't forget that man who's there," Diego reminded them. "The one who drove our car in and didn't come out again."

"We'll check on it when we get there," Slim answered. "Now, here's the plan. I'll open the door and take a look. If they've all gone to bed and the coast is clear, we'll sneak downstairs and outside. They probably don't have a lot of guards around; they depend on their walls. The darkness should cover us until we get to the garage. Once inside, we'll take a look around for the guard and then we'll try and barricade ourselves while Santos tries to establish contact. Then we'll wait." He paused a moment. "O. K.?"

"We should be able to succeed," Santos said. "This time the element of surprise will work for us."

"I'll go first," Slim said. "Santos will follow me, and you three come last. Remember—if we run into trouble, get flat on the floor as far away from us as you can."

They heard the click of the lock being opened. "I'm really getting to know this lock," Slim whispered. "Here goes."

He checked on the downstairs room and reported it apparently empty. Then he opened the door wider and they all filed out onto the balcony. The fire in the fireplace had died away to embers and the single lamp made barely a dent in the gloom.

Slim locked the door behind them and then took up the lead. "Don't stumble."

Walking on tiptoes as close to the wall as they could get, they filed down the balcony and around the corner

toward the stairway. Slim stopped there a moment and listened. Then he began to descend, still keeping as close to the wall as possible to minimize the danger of a creaking tread. The big room seemed utterly deserted as they began to circumnavigate it in the deep shadows under the balcony.

A crack from the embers in the fireplace caused them all to freeze in place, but after a few seconds Slim began to move forward again. The trip around the room seemed endless. A dozen times Roger stopped dead at some faint sound, only to realize it had been his own footsteps or his own breathing. Then, when he had started forward again, it would occur to him that perhaps someone else had heard it, too, and was even now training a gun on their slowly creeping forms. But Slim kept them moving steadily until they were huddled in the little hallway that led to the outside door.

There he held up his hand to stop them. Then he moved forward alone, so silently that he seemed to melt away. They strained their ears, but there was nothing to be heard. A minute went by, and then another. Santos cocked his head to listen better, and finally, motioning them to stand still, he, too, began to move forward.

Then they heard it—a dull thud and a slight rattle. Santos moved quickly then, and the boys, forgetting their orders, followed. Slim was standing in a passageway, gently lowering a figure to the floor. In his free hand he held a rifle.

“He’ll sleep for a while,” he said. “But we’d better tie him up anyway.”

Santos unbuckled the man’s belt to use it to tie his hands.

"Look," he said as he saw the victim's face. "It is our good friend, Juan."

"Maybe we'd better take him with us," Slim said. "He's too good a witness to leave behind."

"True." Santos looked up. "Too bad it wasn't I who went first." His teeth gleamed as he smiled. "That much he owed me."

Roger eyed the Mexican detective's slight figure with some doubt, but any questions as to the man's strength vanished as Santos picked up the unconscious Juan and swung him across his back like a sack of meal.

Slim led the way outside and they followed to slink along the wall of the house. They skirted the building to the far corner and then, after a quick look around, Slim darted across the courtyard to the structure in which they had seen the cars placed.

"Wait here," Slim said when they reached the doors. "I want to look around."

Santos leaned nonchalantly against the wall with his burden until Slim returned a moment later.

"This looks like the only way in—or out," Slim said. "And the windows are small and barred. We could hold it for awhile with my automatic and this rifle."

He lifted the latch and slowly pulled one of the heavy timber doors open. One after another they entered the blackness while Slim waited to close the doors behind them.

"Hold Juan," Santos whispered. "I am more familiar with this kind of building than you are. I will go look for the guard."

They could mark his progress by an occasional sound as he brushed against things. It must have taken him several minutes to reach the far end, obstructed as he was

by vehicles, and further hampered by the need for silence, but they finally heard the creak of a door opening and then the squeak of bed springs. A sleepy voice said something in Spanish and they heard Santos reply. Then there was a short tussle and another dull thud, followed by the sound of a body dropping heavily on the bed.

A loud whisper reached across the darkness. "He sleeps soundly, this one. I will tie him up."

"Roger," Slim said, "take the little flashlight back there and see if you can help."

With the slender finger of light to guide him, Roger threaded his way between cars until he found the small back room. Here he held the light while Santos did a workmanlike job of trussing up their second victim. They left him spread eagled on his bed, a gag in his mouth.

"I will gag Juan also," Santos said. "He might decide to talk at an unfortunate moment." When he had finished, he tied Juan's feet together with a piece of rope they found, and then dumped him, still unconscious, in the back of Santos' big sedan which was standing between Slim's car and Smith's roadster.

Santos crawled over into the front seat of his car. "Now, the radio."

"Roger," Slim said. "You watch the house through the other front window. Bill, you take that one, and Diego can take the one on the side. I'll stay here. Sound off if you see anything."

Behind them they heard little squeals from the transmitter as Santos twisted the dials and made adjustments. Minutes crawled by, broken by faint snatches of words over the loud-speaker. The sky outside began to lighten and, as they waited impatiently, the blackness changed to a deep blue and then to a dull gray. Diego, from his

window on the east, could see definite signs of the rapidly approaching dawn.

"What time is it?" Roger whispered nervously.

"Three-forty."

"Gee. If Mom knew we were up this late, she'd be mad," Bill said.

"And that's not all she'd be mad about," Roger added.

Santos suddenly broke into rapid speech. Then he stopped and listened to the speaker. He said some more into the microphone, and then paper rattled. After a moment he spoke again for several minutes. Then he threw the switch, listened, and said "*Bueno.*" They heard him get out of the car and close the door carefully:

"I have told them where we are—I have a map—and I have also told them how badly we need help. They will come, but it will take at least an hour from Hidalgo." He looked out through Slim's window. "It gets light too rapidly. I think perhaps we will have to make a fight."

Slim grunted his assent. "Is the rifle fully loaded?"

Santos yanked open the breech. "Yes. A full clip. Perhaps Juan has more."

They could hear him going through Juan's pockets. Then he went to the back room and looked for ammunition there. When he came back he sounded quite happy.

"We have fifteen rounds for the rifle."

"And a full clip in the automatic," Slim added. "If the shooting starts, you kids get back as far as possible and get down on the floor. These walls are thick enough to stop rifle bullets, but they'll get through the windows."

"Look!" Roger said. "The lights went on in the courtyard."

"And look who's coming down here," Slim said a second later. "Smith."

"Probably coming to wake that guard," Diego suggested.

Santos laughed. "It will take more than Smith to wake him for awhile."

"O. K.," Slim said. "Stand back. Let him come in and turn on the lights. This one's mine."

They held their breaths as the steps came closer and closer. The latch rattled and the door swung open. There was the click of a light switch and then they saw him standing there about two feet from Slim.

Smith saw the detective at the same moment, and his mouth dropped open in surprise. But it didn't stay open very long. Slim's fist connected with a blow that closed it like a trap. They could hear Smith's teeth click together as his head snapped back under the impact. His eyes glazed over and he slumped to the floor.

Slim calmly closed the door and barred it, and stood there smiling happily while he rubbed the knuckles of his right hand.

"A few more," Santos laughed, "and we won't need the guns at all." He snapped the lights off and stooped to bind Smith securely. "I'll put him with Juan. They can keep each other company."

"Lights!" Diego exclaimed. "In the house."

They all ran to the windows and watched the big house blink into life, room after room.

"They know we're missing," Slim said. "Now we'll get it."

Santos worked the bolt of the rifle, rammed a shell into the chamber, and shouldered Roger to one side to take up a position at the window.

"Get back," Slim directed, and the boys walked re-

luctantly to the rear of the room and lay down on the floor.

Santos suddenly raised the rifle and sighted along it. There was a shattering report and then silence. The Mexican chuckled again. "Now they know we are armed." He worked the bolt again and the spent cartridge clicked against the stone wall as a fresh one entered the chamber.

"We could shoot the courtyard lights out," Slim said.

"No. It is better that they should be on. They will help guide my men."

Something hit the rear wall then, and a split second later they heard the report from the house.

"You kids all right?" Slim asked.

"Yeah," Roger said. "But we're going to get behind this tractor."

"Tractor?" Slim asked. "What's that doing here?"

"They must operate the hacienda," Santos said. "It helps the disguise if people think this a genuine farm."

Another bullet screamed through the window then and smacked into the rear wall, showering the boys with splinters of stone and cement. Santos fired again, and from the house came the sound of breaking glass.

"If we had sufficient ammunition," he said, "we could stay here for a long time."

"We don't have enough to waste," Slim reminded him.

"Hold your fire."

"Maybe they'll take this chance to get away," Bill suggested.

"In what?" Roger asked. "Their cars are in here."

Slim looked at his watch. "It'll take another forty-five minutes for help to get here."

In the half light, they could see Santos shrug. "We can

wait—and they *must* wait. Unless they have heavy artillery they cannot get in here without crossing the open court. And if they cross the open court they are—how do you say it?”

“Dead ducks,” Diego supplied.

“*Si*. That is it. Except that I do not like to call them ducks. I am very fond of ducks.”

Slim fired then, and before the echoes died away he fired a second time. “We won’t have forty-five minutes,” he said grimly. “Look.”

They all crowded to the front windows—even the boys—and looked where Slim was pointing.

“See?” he continued. “They’ve just rolled a steel drum around the corner. Probably gasoline or kerosene. This garage is lower than the house. If they can roll that drum down here against the wooden doors and then shoot holes in it, the gasoline will leak in here. Then all they’ll have to do will be to light it with another bullet. In that case,” he added to Santos with a grim smile, “the idiom would be ‘Our goose is cooked!’”

Santos fired as if in comment, and there was a clang as the bullet went through the drum.

Liquid began to spurt out in a steady stream.

An arm came from behind the corner of the house and attempted to push the drum around to face the garage more squarely. The Mexican fired again and the stone just above the drum disappeared in a shower of dust.

“The gas that’s leaking out—” Roger said in a choked voice, “won’t that run down here?”

“I don’t think so,” Slim said briefly. “It’ll be absorbed by the soil before it gets this far.”

Back at the big house there seemed to have developed a respect for Slim and Santos’ marksmanship, for the men

were now trying to nudge the drum with a pole. But Slim and Santos held their fire for the time being. They had to—there weren't many bullets left.

The drum rolled a bit and then stopped. Again the pole pushed it. It rolled another foot in their direction and stopped again. That time Santos took careful aim and fired. The pole shattered and they heard a howl of pain.

But a few minutes later another pole was thrust around the corner to prod at the heavy drum.

Roger looked up at Slim and swallowed a lump in his throat. If that drum was rolled down against the doors and then set afire. . . .

"Look," Bill whispered. "They moved it another foot. It's almost at the edge of the hill."

"Another five feet," Santos corrected grimly. He jammed a fresh clip in the gun. "We have, perhaps, another five minutes to devise a plan." He fired again and another pole became splinters. "How many poles do they have?" he muttered.

"More than we have bullets, I think," Slim answered. "And many more than we have minutes."

Roger had grabbed Bill's hand without realizing it. He had suddenly remembered something Slim had said: There was only one way out of the garage—through the doors. And if they were burning. . . .



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FOR SEVERAL MINUTES there was no activity, and then the drum got another push which sent it within a foot of the beginning of the incline.

"Ha!" Santos exclaimed. "They have outreached themselves. See, the pole no longer reaches the barrel."

Roger craned to look over Santos' shoulder. He was right: The pole couldn't reach the drum. In an effort to make it go farther, someone stuck his arm around the corner.

Santos fired and the pole dropped as another howl reached them. "Perhaps," he said, "they will now be content to wait."

"No such luck," Slim muttered. "Look, they're pushing

a second drum around the corner. They're going to push the first with the second."

Santos sighed. "I think we need a tank. Then we could crash through the gates." He stopped abruptly. "My car—it is supposedly bulletproof. Could we . . .?"

"I doubt it," Slim said. "If we hit those gates with your car it would wreck it and leave us sitting there helpless."

"Tank!" Roger exclaimed. "Tank?" His voice rose. "We've got a tank right here."

Slim looked at him curiously.

"Sure we have. That caterpillar tractor. Couldn't that smash through the gates?"

"But who will drive it?" Santos asked.

"Nobody! It'll drive itself if we can get it started." Roger turned to Diego. "You know more about them than we do. If we get it started in the right direction will it go straight by itself?"

Diego turned to look at it. "It should. It's heavy enough."

"Can you start it?" Roger asked. "Did you ever drive one like that?"

"We had one once—it's an old-timer. I'm not sure I can get it started."

Slim snapped into life. "Try it, Diego. Roger, you pull Santo's car over to one side so that Diego can drive the tractor up to the doors.

From the tractor there came loud clanking and wheezing as Diego tried to get the huge motor to turn over; Santos' car throbbed as the motor caught and then there was a clash of gears as Roger began to maneuver it in the confined space. He pulled it up toward the front until the bumper nudged the doors, and then backed it to the right. Over and over he repeated that forward and backing mo-

tion, until he had the car alongside the tractor, and the latter had a clear path to the door.

Just then there was a cough from the tractor's heavy motor and a cloud of black smoke billowed up out of its vertical exhaust pipe. The motor died, but Diego got it running again and the choking cloud began to fill the room.

"Break out those windows, Bill," Slim ordered. "We'll suffocate before we get out of here."

The motor of the tractor began to run more smoothly as it warmed up, and when Diego raced it the powerful exhaust set the air to vibrating.

Santos fired again. "Another pole," he said. "This is very tiring."

Gears ground loudly and the heavy machine lurched forward. Diego stopped it when the treads were just touching the doors.

Slim stepped back from the window. "Ready? O.K. First I'll open these doors a little to let you see the gates in the wall, Diego. They're almost straight ahead so it shouldn't be impossible to aim the tractor at them." He grinned. "But please, don't make any mistakes—this is the only chance we'll have."

Eying the gates through the narrow slit in the doors, Diego backed the tractor up and then moved it forward until he could sight over it and see the wooden barriers a hundred feet away. "I'm all set."

"Get it in low speed and open the throttle. When you get it moving, jump off."

"Wait!" Santos stopped them. "Move my car directly behind the tractor. If the gates are smashed we want to get out immediately."

Again Roger got behind the wheel of the big sedan and

began to shift its position in the garage. Back and forth he went, two feet at a time, until it was touching the rear of the tractor.

"Ready?" Slim asked. "I'll push the doors open for you."

"Wait a minute!" This time it was Roger who held up the proceedings.

"Not much more time," Santos grunted as he fired two shots. "The second drum is almost touching the first. One more push. . . ." He put his last clip into the gun.

"I want to make sure they don't follow us," Roger said. "Bill—open those car hoods and take out the distributor rotors."

"Good," Slim said. "But hurry."

In a matter of seconds, Bill and Roger had removed the vital rotors from Slim's car, from Smith's roadster, and from another big sedan that stood in the far corner. Roger threw the parts into the back of Santos' car.

"Want to take that other man along, too?" Bill asked. "The one in the back room, I mean."

"Two is sufficient," Santos said.

"O.K., Diego. Get the engine racing."

The roar of the tractor drowned out all other sounds as the motor got up to speed. Diego set the hand throttle to keep the motor racing, then he waved to Slim—talking would have been impossible.

Slim shoved the two doors open wide and jumped back out of range as Diego let in the clutch and the massive machine started forward. The boy leaped and fell into Slim's arms just as the driver's seat passed out into the open and the tractor began its unguided trip toward the gates.

For an instant it faltered as the engine coughed, but

then it picked up a steady beat and slowly, ponderously, it lumbered toward the wooden barrier. There was a shout from the house, and a volley of shots battered against its metal sides. After one lucky hit water spurted from the radiator. But the engine throbbed unhesitatingly, and the tractor continued to move forward. Back in the garage five pairs of eyes watched its progress with pounding hearts.

Suddenly a man dashed out from behind the house and sprinted for the clanking machine. Slim brought up his automatic and fired twice in quick succession. The first bullet threw up a puff of dust in front of the runner; the second must have struck at his feet for he stopped, hesitated a split second, and then turned and ran at a limping gait back to the house.

Another volley of shots rang out from his confederates. They struck noisily against the tractor, but miraculously none seemed to hit a vital part. The distance between the machine and the great gates was steadily diminishing, but with what seemed agonizing slowness to Roger. Behind the wideflung doors of the garage he felt how vulnerable they were. If the men in the house guessed how little ammunition they had left, and rushed toward them with guns firing—

Fifty feet separated the tractor and the gates—then forty, and then thirty. The men in the house were firing more wildly at it now, trying desperately to stop the lumbering creature before it reached its destination. The exhaust stack was perforated, and the radiator must have been riddled because the water was spurting out as if from a fountain.

Finally a shot struck the gas tank. And in a moment the leaking fuel had become ignited from the hot exhaust.

Flames leaped up in the pale morning air. But the blazing tractor kept moving. Twenty feet, fifteen feet, ten feet. The boys held their breaths.

Now the test was coming. Would the machine be powerful enough to crash through the heavy timbers that barred its way? It struck! The gates bent but they resisted, and the steel treads chewed into the hard-packed dirt. The nose of the tractor lifted and the exhaust roared louder than ever. And then the timbers gave.

There was a loud report as if a cannon had been fired when the heavy wooden bars snapped. The gates burst open. Gathering speed, the tractor passed through.

"Quick!" Santos shouted. "Get in the car!"

He was already in the driver's seat, and the motor was roaring. Slim jumped in beside him and the boys dove into the rear, crouching as low as they could on top of the quiet figures of Smith and Juan.

Slim opened his window just enough to put the muzzle of the automatic through, and then Santos let the clutch in. The tires screamed on the cement floor as the wheels spun, and then they were out in the open with the car gaining speed like a rocket.

The moment it left its shelter it became a target for frenzied marksmen. Shots rattled against the body, and the windows blossomed with stars as bullets struck their surface and fell harmlessly away. It seemed an eternity, but actually it was only a few seconds before they had crossed the courtyard and rushed through the sagging gates. Then they were out in the open and ripping along the rough trail at breakneck speed.

Santos, hunched over the wheel like a jockey coming down the home stretch, kept his accelerator pressed to the floor.

"We're out of range now," Slim said finally.

Santos eased up slightly, and the car dropped down to a safer speed. When he had put another thousand feet between themselves and the hacienda, he stopped the car.

"Now." He grinned and his teeth gleamed whitely in his grimy face. "Now we wait until our reinforcements get here."

Slowly the boys sat up on the back seat, and drew what seemed to be their first full breath in days. They looked at each other curiously, as if they expected to see visible signs of the tense drama they had just lived through.

There was a low groan from the floor.

Roger looked down. "It's Juan. He's coming to."

Slim got out of the car and looked back. "They're at the gate back there."

"Good. That is where they shall stay for awhile. And their fire cannot reach us at this distance." Santos grinned at Roger. "I begin to believe all the stories I have heard about you boys. First you think of the telephone. Then you think of the tractor, and finally you think to spoil all the cars." He sighed. "Soon our friends will come. I hope they will bring something to eat."

"I couldn't eat for a week," Bill said weakly.

"What?" Slim, Roger and Diego spoke at once.

"You must be sick," Slim smiled.

Juan groaned again, and Santos looked down over the back of the seat at him. "*Amigo*, do not disturb us. You will have an opportunity to speak later."

"Let's haul them out," Slim suggested.

Santos nodded, and helped Slim drag the still unconscious Smith and the half-conscious Juan out of the car and prop them up against a small tree. Smith half opened

his eyes. He started to say something, but stopped when he saw Juan. They looked at each other helplessly.

"Ha!" Santos pointed down the road. "Dust. Perhaps our friends come?"

"Let's take no chances," Slim said. He picked up the rifle and laid it across the hood of the car pointing down the road. "Keep out of sight," he said to the boys.

But when the cars came into view Santos started forward to meet them. "It is all right," he said over his shoulder. "I recognize the first car. It is the chief of police from Hidalgo.

The four-car caravan pulled to a dusty stop beside them, and for five minutes the air was full of crackling Spanish. Santos introduced the chief to Slim and the boys, while two of his men hauled Smith and Juan upright, loosened the bonds on their feet and led them to one of the cars.

"You will please wait here," Santos said to Slim. "We will go and complete our work. When I signal to you, you can drive my car back to the hacienda."

"I'll go along with you now," Slim said.

"No, my friend," Santos smiled. "You have already done too much. And you have a responsibility to these young detectives." He smiled at the boys.

They watched the four cars pull away toward the hacienda. When they reached the walls, a small figure got out of one of the cars and approached the battered gates. It stood still there for several minutes.

"Santos is probably trying to get them to surrender," Slim said.

"He's got his share of nerve," Roger said. "Walking out unprotected like that."

"They've got nothing to gain by fighting now," Slim

said. "If they've got any sense they'll give it up as a bad job."

Santos finally got back into the car, and three of the vehicles drove into the courtyard, leaving one to block the gateway.

"I guess that's that," Diego said.

As if in answer a flurry of gunshots rang out. For several minutes the firing went on regularly, and then it was reduced to an occasional shot. Slim walked to the car and stood there undecided. Another report reached them, and then another.

Slim got in the car. "I'm going back," he said decisively. "You stay here."

"Wait a minute," Bill said. "There's Santos at the gate now. He's waving."

"Good. Get in." Slim started the motor. "I guess it's all over."

They parked the car outside the wall and joined Santos at the gateway.

"Most of them," Santos said, "were sensible; they surrendered. The leader was a little stubborn. He and two men barricaded themselves in the garage. It took a little time to convince them."

"Are they—?" Roger couldn't finish the question. He felt a little sick.

Santos shook his head. "Fortunately, no. They are perhaps not as healthy as they were an hour ago, but they will recover. A little tear gas did the work."

One of the policemen came up to Santos then and said something. Santos laughed and answered. Then he turned to Roger.

"You will, perhaps, restore the cars to working order? We would like to drive them away with our prisoners."

"Oh, sure." Roger went back to the car and got the distributor parts. "Is it all right to go in the garage?"

"Perfectly safe," Santos assured him.

"Come on," Roger said to Bill and Diego. "Give me a hand."

Fifteen minutes later they drove Slim's car out into the courtyard. "They're all fixed," Roger said.

Slim got into the car and then leaned out to speak to Santos. "What do you want us to do?"

"Now, nothing. Go back to Hidalgo and rest. Tomorrow I wish you to identify the leader and those of his men you saw. If you will sign depositions it will not be necessary for you to waste any more of your vacation."

"Don't worry about our vacation," Roger said grinning. "Don't forget we've got a stake in this, too. I hope you can get the rest of them now."

Santos shrugged. "Many of them we already know. Others we will learn about from these we have captured. To catch all of them will take much time and much watchfulness, but it is a price we are willing to pay. Mexicans have been slaves or serfs for a great part of their country's life, so perhaps that is why we have no use for Fascists—or for any others who might try to become our masters. That is why, too, we are so grateful for your assistance." He stopped suddenly. "But this is not the place for thanks. That can better be done in Mexico City."

"We don't want thanks," Slim said. "We—"

Santos interrupted him with a laugh. "You, I think, are like myself. We do not like speeches. But sometimes they must be made. In this case it is most important that formal recognition be made of your aid. It will help show that there is friendship between our countries and that we can fight together in a common cause." He

turned to face Bill. "But that is only the *formal* business. We, you four and myself, must celebrate our victory together without ambassadors to bother us. I have made four new friends, and to a Mexican nothing is more important than friends."

"You're telling us," Bill said, thinking of the Montez family at La Gloria.

Santos winked at Slim. "It is too bad, Bill, that you do not want to eat, for in Mexico City I know a restaurant where they serve food so good that people come from all parts of the world to eat it." He sighed. "But I suppose we can leave you in the hotel while we feast, if you insist."

"Hey! Wait a minute!" Bill sat up in his anxiety. "I can eat, don't worry." He stopped and grinned. "O.K. Have fun. As long as I get to eat, it's all right with me."

Santos stepped back from the car. "You will find your way back?"

Slim nodded. "Can't go wrong."

Santos raised his hand. "Until this evening at the hotel then."

The hotel staff was just waking up when they entered the lobby and dragged themselves wearily up the stairs. Nothing in their rooms had changed since their precipitate departure the night before.

Bill dropped his bag with a thud. "What I want," he said, "is to be allowed to spend one whole night in a bed."

"From now on," Roger laughed, "you will be."

"Hey, Bill!" Diego stuck his head out of the bathroom. "The water in the shower is good and hot."

Bill sprawled on the bed. "Who cares? I want something to eat and then I want to sleep."

There was a gentle tapping on the door and all of them stiffened automatically.

"Oh, no," Slim groaned. "Not again." He walked to the door and pulled it open.

The night clerk stood there. "Señor Warner, I must apologize for calling the police." He shrugged his shoulders. "But it was your fault, señor."

"Our fault?" Roger gasped.

"Certainly," the clerk replied with dignity. "If you had not left the telephone off the hook, the buzzer would not have disturbed me." He closed the door behind him just as the room exploded into shouts of laughter. The clerk shook his head sadly. "Those Americans. They are crazy."



